



The Isiac Knot

A Novel By: Mona Goshen

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Chapter One

April, 1971

As Betty sat on the edge of her bed and reached to open the bedside table drawer, she caught a glimpse of her wedding picture and then her reflection in the dresser mirror. Past and present stared back at her. Youth and beauty had long ago slipped away, replaced by etched lines that articulated the toll of time. She didn't mind though, because she considered those marks of age a friendly reminder of all she had experienced in her seventy-five years.

Returning to her intended task, she withdrew a chain from the drawer, settled into the pile of pillows she had propped against the headboard and pulled the covers over her lower body. Fixating on the key dangling from the chain, she wondered if she would fully appreciate her life had it not come into her possession. She fingered the chain absentmindedly and scanned the room, taking in her favorite things. She paused at the dresser to admire two porcelain dolls she had acquired years ago in an antique shop. Produced in the Victorian era, they were covered from neck to toe in delicate flowing fabrics, embellished with lace and pearl buttons that emphasized the hourglass shape of those corseted times.

She couldn't choose between the two, because, at the moment she saw them, she knew she must have them both. Even after she examined their markings and discovered they were not created by the same artist, but rather came together at some unknown point on their journey, she saw them as icons for the friendship and camaraderie of the women who had graced her own life. The permanence of their delicate features, protected by the hardening process of the glassmaker, exuded a strength that always captivated her. It seemed to warn her not to forget how a twinkle of the eye or a coy smile had served to camouflage an ulterior motive or two. Long gone were the days when her objections to the restrictive corsets had fallen on deaf ears, as she was forced to relinquish the frivolity of her youth to adhere to conventionality and the dictates of her father. Yes, she thought, you old girls stand guard over some of my most poignant memories.

She smiled when she remembered her privileged observation, and then later her participation among the ranks of some of the early suffragettes, who by their example eventually led women to shed restrictive thoughts as well as outer attire.

Betty moved on to Tom's valet, standing erect in the corner as a reminder of his presence in her life for so many years. It now intervened as the only masculine influence she chose to keep, when she traded the neutrality of the blue and brown tones for the field of roses adorning the

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bedspread, chair, and lace-trimmed pillows. She missed the way Tom had always made her feel so protected and safe without overpowering her, and winced a bit, begrudgingly reminded of her father's authoritarian dominance in her mother's life.

She had sidestepped most of the mental abuse her father continually inflicted on her mother, and she vowed early in life she would seek to avoid such abusive behavior in a man when she married. Only in hindsight could she affirm her choice, she thought as she reminisced about Tom, who never once gave her reason for regret. She honored his presence in her life by leaving a piece of him within view in this space that was never occupied by another man.

Betty suddenly realized her reverie into her past caused her body to tense. She looked down to see she had clenched a fist around the chain in her hand, as if subconsciously calling attention to the reason she held it. She released her grip, and closed her eyes, in an effort to quiet her mind and narrow her mental horizon to present time.

Her thoughts shifted to her granddaughter, Patricia, to whom she would relinquish possession of the key after having safeguarded it for forty-five years. She hoped Patricia's life would be enriched, as hers certainly had, by what it would reveal. Yes, thought Betty, today I will cross over an entire generation to open a door for my granddaughter, and hopefully convey to her the importance of maintaining vigilance over our family's legacy. She relaxed at the thought, even as she contemplated how Patricia might react to her proposal, and allowed the past to tuck itself away as she dozed.

Patricia let herself in the front door, knowing her grandmother likely retired for the evening. She knew she only imagined the smell of baking bread, as Grams' arthritis had curtailed that weekly tradition years ago. Still, just the thought of the old ritual called forth the childhood days she had spent in this house, and the deeply imbedded connection that had so easily evolved with Grams over the years. She leaned her back into the door and closed her eyes as it clicked shut, longing to recapture the comfort and joy of her youth as the imagery of bread baking lulled her away from a long torrential rain of demands that now seemed to fill her days.

When she was ten she couldn't wait to be twenty, and when she was twenty she couldn't wait to be thirty, the magical year when she had envisioned her life coming together into some culmination of success that equated to happiness. That long-range goal had sparkled and enticed, but the brightness had diminished as she approached her deadline. Her once lofty goals now seemed more like restrictive bindings than the freedom she had envisioned for herself when she finished college and entered the real world.

She shouldn't complain, she thought. She had accomplished what she had set out to achieve; a top-notch job in a prestigious advertising firm, a reasonably good income and the attention of those higher-ups who seemed to recognize her talent, even if only to elevate themselves and use her as a bolster beneath them. She was on track for a great career, but without much additional substance in her life. Still, she continued forward with determination, and knew in her heart she would maintain the push because she could not bear the thought of her alternatives.

Barbie, Patricia's pet name for her mother Mary, represented those alternatives and never ceased in her efforts to convince Patricia of the merits of domesticity. As the self-appointed queen of fanfare and perfection, Barbie's efforts could have easily positioned the family in a ten-page magazine spread of pictures and tips to tantalize the novice striving for the Barbie and Ken lifestyle.

Patricia never understood her mother's motivation, since her father rarely made it home to interact with that family he so diligently toiled to provide for. When at home, he acted like an

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acquaintance that stopped by to visit, interacting with the platitudes and gracious gratitude of a guest who appreciates the effort of a hostess.

Realizing thoughts of her parents had obliterated the peaceful imagery she had captured for only a moment, Patricia opened her eyes. She shed her jacket, laid it across her purse on the foyer table, and headed up the stairs, wishing she could detach from the melancholy that lately threatened to replace her determination with the same ease, as she climbed.

When she reached the top of the landing, she moved to her grandmother's bedroom and stopped in the doorway, breathing in the serene ambiance before her. The soft glow of light from the bedside lamp cast a dim light, allowing the roses on the wallpaper to float across the wall. An eclectic variety of pillows propped her grandmother's body as she lay sleeping amid the supple folds of the comforter, emanating the same calmness she always commanded in any room she occupied. Patricia remained motionless in the doorway, wanting to tuck this picture of perfection away in her memory so she could later pull it forth as a reminder of what she wished for herself.

She wondered, at what point in her life had her grandmother acquired this serenity? At what point had she recognized it and embraced it? At what point, if any, could Patricia ever expect it for herself? Grams stirred slightly, and Patricia was drawn to a glint of silver that lay across the frail hand that graced her grandmother's chest. As she moved across the room to investigate, her foot hit a creaky floorboard. Her grandmother opened her eyes and smiled lovingly. "I was just resting a bit while I waited for you. Come. Sit here next to me." She patted the bed and pulled herself a bit more erect. "These pillows are so much more comfortable than the chair."

Patricia felt the ten-year-old in her reach down and fling off her shoes as she crossed the room, and she had to restrain her urge to fly on to the bed. Manners and dignity prevailed in the approach, but she immediately fell back against the pile of pillows and rolled into her grandmother's embrace, whispering, "I always feel like such a kid when I'm around you, Grams."

"And what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, except my thirtieth birthday is creeping up on me, and I think it's time to set aside childish tendencies."

"Oh, but you are wrong, my darling." Grams stroked her hair as she continued, "Certain things we should never give up, especially when they make us feel warm and fuzzy inside. You have to look out for yourself or no one else will."

"Isn't that the truth?" Patricia knew she heard wisdom even though the image it evoked didn't necessarily transcend into her reality that demanded she cover her ass before someone chewed off a piece of it. Cocooning oneself in a loving embrace hardly qualified for self-preservation, but neither did the pressures of her world belong here. She closed her eyes submitting to the warmth that emanated from the gentle caress as her grandmother's heartbeat pounded out a rhythm that beckoned her to get in sync with it and release the tension that she paced to during her day.

They comfortably shared the silence with intermittent tidbits of idle chatter for the next half-hour, a sort of ritual they had adapted to over the past few years. Content to remain in this relaxed state, Patricia realized she could easily fall asleep. She feared if she did, she would never jumpstart her engines to tackle the work that awaited her in the car, and she opened her eyes. Seeing the silver chain clasped in her grandmother's free hand, she reached out to touch it.

"What have you got there?"

"Something I have waited a long time to give you," Grams lifted her hand to reveal the key that dangled from the chain, and handed it to Patricia.

"What does the key open?" Patricia inquired.

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"It is the key to an adventure that you may choose to embark on, but you might also choose to ignore."

Considering the miniscule amount of discretionary time she still commanded control over, Patricia cynically replied without hesitation, "I'm not so sure I am up for an adventure, Grams, unless maybe you could scare up a man and a few kids, since I fear my biological clock is ticking toward extinction. I feel as though I spent the past ten years on a detour and can't find my way back to center."

"Then perhaps this key is just what you need. I don't know about finding a man to make babies with you, but I do know this key holds the potential for you to find your way to a place of belonging."

"Sounds intriguing, but perhaps not very realistic, Grams. Does this key protect some deep, dark family secret?"

"Well, in a way. I guess you could say that."

"Now you have my attention," Patricia said as she sat up to examine the key.

"Maybe if I focus on someone else's problems or validate my screwed-up existence as somehow normal in our family..."

Grams interrupted. "Don't jump to conclusions. May I share a story?"

Patricia fell back against the pillows, fingering the key as she said, "Sure, I'm all ears."

"It is no accident I present this key to you just before your thirtieth birthday. It has been in our family for many years and passed each generation from mother to firstborn daughter.

Each recipient adds to a puzzle of sorts as the process continues. When I accepted the key from my mother, I agreed to responsibly take part. I offered it to your mother, but she declined to participate, so now I must offer it to you to complete my assignment."

Patricia tensed slightly without moving from her position. "Grams, I am stretched to my limits right now, and I don't know that I can commit to anything more." The tension was swelling in her chest as she wrestled with her fantasy-turned-nightmare. Even if Grams could create her fantasy man, she didn't know how she would fit him into her life. She looked down at the key and wished it could open some magical door that would allow her to escape from her life.

Realizing Grams was talking, she pulled herself back to the conversation.

"...not my intent to put more burden on your shoulders. I simply share this information to fulfill my obligation. Once I have fully explained, you must decide whether you want to join the adventure or hand the key back. Your decision will be made in several phases. First, this key opens a trunk up in my attic. I ask that you go there tonight, take the contents of the trunk with you, and once you have examined them, come back to visit me. You need not proceed further, but as a favor to an old woman, would you at least undertake this one step in the process and then listen to what I have to say?"

Sensing the unspoken pleading in Gram's voice, Patricia sat upright again and moved to face her grandmother. "Oh, Grams, I would do anything you ask just because I love you. Tell me exactly what I need to do."

Grams smiled and relief filled her eyes as she spoke, "Very well then, off with you. Don't do anything with the contents until you get home, and don't call or come back until you complete your examination."

"You make this sound like some sort of mystery, the way you are rushing me off."

"And it will present itself as just that until we come back together."

"Can I get you anything before I leave?"

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"No, my dear. Your willingness to indulge my request is enough for this evening."

Patricia pushed off the bed, retrieved her shoes, and leaned over to kiss her grandmother. When she reached the door, she turned and observed a mischievous look on her grandmother's face. "I hope that look is an indication I will not find something awful about our family in this trunk of yours."

"You can assume that much."

"Is it the only trunk up there, or am I to look for a specific one among others?"

"There are others, but the key fits the trunk in the far corner."

Patricia recalled her childhood rummaging in this attic as she climbed the stairs. Maybe she had even seen the contents of the trunk already she thought as she ducked through the short doorway and entered her old playground. Nothing had changed in twenty years, except she looked down at everything instead of up. Her old haunt beckoned her to sleuth out the old costumes and jewelry and slip into the façade of frivolity she had relished as a little girl. No time for childish games, she thought, scanning the room. She spied the trunk in the corner. Intrigued by the supposed mystery she might uncover, she walked a direct path to it and inserted the key in the lock. Lifting the lid revealed more empty space than contents, a space much too large for the three books that lay in the center of the trunk as if they were on display. Two seemed similar and of the same type of leather, old and embossed. No writing was on the exterior of either. The third, also leather, did not appear as old. As she reached in to retrieve them, Patricia thought it must have been awhile since Grams had come up to the attic because reading in the dim light cast by the single bulb, hanging in the center of the room, would prove impossible.

Patricia closed the lid, removed the key, and stood upright. She turned and walked to the door before some old memory jumped out to grab her ankle and lure her into some unsolicited fantasyland that no longer suited her.

When she descended from the attic, she noticed immediately that the door to her grandmother's room was closed and no light escaped from beneath it. From this unspoken message, she surmised she need not leave the key and Grams had been serious about no further discussion until she completed her assignment. Descending the stairs, Patricia realized Grams hadn't specified a timeline for completion of this mysterious assignment and she hoped these books contained easy reading. Since she allocated Monday and Thursday evenings with Grams, perhaps she could squeeze this little thorn in over the weekend and finish this discussion on Monday.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, she picked up her coat, but did not put it on. Instead she stood dead center in the foyer and gazed into the living room. She was tempted to plop down in one of the overstuffed chairs and read, to prolong the feelings she conjured so easily in this house, but always lost as soon as she departed. She inhaled deeply and released the breath in a long sigh as she donned her coat, gathered up her newly acquired possessions, and walked out of the house.

Betty heard the door close and waited for the sound of Patricia's car engine before she reached for the light she had turned off to discourage any further inquiries from Patricia. She was not quite ready to sleep after such a tenuous encounter, the outcome about which she still could only speculate. Leaning back against her pillows, she sat quietly and turned her head once again to look at the dolls, knowing they would encourage her to bring her cherished memories out for a dusting and review.

She had raised four children, watched them marry and raise their own children, lived with, loved and lost a husband, survived two world wars, a depression, and the beginnings of an uprising she had observed as a child, participated in as a woman, and then allocated the years following to

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pondering its affects. The bra burnings of her granddaughter's generation were but a follow-up endorsement to a fight for suffrage fought more than half-a-century earlier. Yes, she thought, these dolls 'eyes hold a twinkle of knowing, an understanding that within any prison lingers a spirit of adventure, which needs freedom to express itself. For Betty, these dolls symbolized the strength of conviction women had and should never forget, lest the confining walls of the prison be regenerated.

She knew her granddaughter was up for the challenge she had presented, and she sighed with relief that they had both made it through the first round of her assignment.

Dead tired at the end of the following day, Patricia begged off on her usual Friday night soirée for drinks with her co-workers and opted for a glass of wine and a movie by herself. She lugged her weekend pile of work to the elevator and shifted the load to reach for the elevator button. The shift of weight to one arm painfully reminded her of the sleep deprivation she would incur to meet her current deadline.

Arriving at her car, parked on the far side of the employee parking lot in an unreserved space, she opened the passenger door and was confronted with the books, still sitting where she had left them the night before. She set her briefcase and her files on the seat, closed the door and dragged her now limp and defeated attitude around the car and climbed in. "So much for the movie," she groaned.

Sitting on her loveseat in her most comfortable pajamas and the ratty companion bathrobe, accompanied by a glass of Chardonnay, which stood guard over her resolve, Patricia opened the cover of the first book as light jazz floated through the room creating an artificial backdrop of ambiance. She was confronted with an inscription on the inside cover.

July 2, 1601

Dearest Naomi,

Two separate paths will tear us apart, but let us pay homage to our friendship as we capture our individual adventures in our journals and thereby enhance the times we share when we reunite.

My heart aches because I miss you so already.

I love you like a sister,

Sasha

So these two books go together, thought Patricia. She turned to the first entry.

July 20, 1601

I miss her so much. My days are empty with no one to talk to. Nothing to record except my horrific loneliness and longing to know where she is and how

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long she will be gone. She said two years or perhaps more. What shall I do with myself?

August 10, 1601

The prospect of security pales in importance when I ponder marriage to a man twenty years my senior, even though our union solidifies a business arrangement that will greatly benefit my family. Dare I hope that love will grow out of such a union? I could have resisted my father's encouragement of this courtship, but no other prospects await me at present. Oh, that I had within me the adventurous streak that spurs Sasha to take chances that I shun. She will miss my wedding, which is probably best, since I know she would not approve. I do not possess her courage and yet I wish just once I could muster her sense of adventure and conviction that leads her to pursue all of life's possibilities. As I do not, I am resigned to my plight as I search for some crumb of satisfaction.

Initially appalled by what she read, Patricia chuckled at the thought that filtered in, uninvited. An arranged marriage might be the only way she could expect to find a husband at the rate she was going. Looking for a diversion from such a baneful thought and curious about the free-spirited side of this friendship, she closed the first book and opened its counterpart.

September 3, 1601

We have been at sea for two months now. Grandfather entertains me with wonderful stories of his past adventures in foreign lands and I am excited to expand my horizons beyond the life that circumstance carved for me at birth. Still, as I see the hardship we must endure to reach our final destination, the Spice Islands, I wonder if I was crazy to leave Amsterdam based on some fitful fantasy of a better life. Will I withstand the challenges that surely would test the strength and stamina of any man? I miss Naomi and I wish she were here to tell me I made the right choice. Not that she would. She pleaded with me not to put myself at risk. I long for female companionship. I will endure, knowing I need not go more than once. I can return to my life and never look back to question what I might have missed. What I would give for a warm bath and a soft clean robe.

Patricia wondered how her grandmother had come to have these old journals in her possession as she knew of no Dutch heritage in her family lineage. Curiosity overcame her, and she moved to the third book and turned to the first page.

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I don't know quite what I should make of this task at hand, but how could I refuse my mother's request to carry on this family legacy? After all, it is but a small commitment of my time and didn't seem to affect her life adversely. Surely I can trust her not to steer me astray and, since I don't have much adventure in my very ordinary life, why not partake in a little mysterious jaunt into the past.

Patricia recognized her grandmother's handwriting immediately and stopped reading. Curious as to how long her grandmother took to complete the third diary, she turned to the final entry. Thirty years seemed like a long time to write in only one journal, she thought as she flipped through to discover that a year passed between each entry and all coincided with her grandmother's birthdays. She counted backward to determine her grandmother had written her first entry a few days after her thirtieth birthday.

Shifting again to the companion diaries, she found they too were written over a similar time span, although the entries did not coincide with an annual date, as her grandmother's entries did. Her curiosity peaked as Patricia reached for her wine and settled in for what she knew would be an evening plagued with questions that only Grams could answer. She chose Sasha's diary to read first, since she had initiated the writing of the two companion journals.

Patricia awoke at 6:00 a.m. the following morning because her neck begged for a pillow after having hung, unsupported for hours. As the night wore on, she had repeatedly encouraged herself to put the diaries aside, but intrigue enticed her to turn the page for what the next entry might reveal about each of the writers. Not until she had read all three from cover-to-cover and then a second time, reading one entry from each diary in tandem, did she fall asleep while pondering what the three women had shared about themselves as well as their observations about the others.

She lifted her grandmother's diary off her lap, moved it to the coffee table, and lay down on the couch, having decided against further sleep, but not quite ready to launch her day. Lying at eye level with the books, she catalogued their contents mentally as she squirmed to cocoon herself into the throw she had dragged off the back of the couch.

Naomi and Sasha contrasted each other, as friends often do. Sasha, the adventurous rebel devoted her entire life to traveling the world. First she traveled east to the Spice Islands and discovered a broadly diverse climate and culture from what she had left behind in Amsterdam. When she had seen all that she could, she shifted her focus to the West and experienced the New World created by the immigrants who went before her to settle uncharted territory. Her romantic escapades would have made good fodder for a steamy romance novel except her diary ended without her finding a knight in shining armor. Not surprising, since she never stayed in one place long enough to plant roots or pursue anything that even remotely resembled a committed relationship.

Naomi, on the other hand, lived within the restrictive confines dictated by marriage and family. She opted for security and married a man who lavished her in luxury. Yet for all his efforts directed at taking care of Naomi, he never captured her heart. Instead, she focused her attention on raising their children as she attempted to adapt herself to a role that was designed for her, but, as her writing revealed, never accommodated her individual needs. Although her husband died when she was still young enough to remarry, Naomi's writing revealed she could not expect much more than

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her first marriage had provided, if she had opted to marry again within the class-imposed structure of her time.

The two women lived the better part of their adult lives apart, coming together only for short intervals, but they remained true to their commitment, and their diaries chronicled three decades, often revealing their inner most feelings about the mundane as well as the intimate. Each made the best of the situations she encountered, but they often speculated about how their lives might have been different based on their observations of each other. Both suspected, at times, they had missed out on something their counterpart already had.

As she compared the lives of these two strangers, Patricia's best friend, Alicia came to mind. She sometimes envied what Alicia had created since they graduated from college and what Patricia had yet to find. Alicia married her college sweetheart and decided, after having kids, to give up the chase for corporate stature they had both sworn to pursue when they graduated. She hadn't opted for total domesticity, but had happily compromised in an effort to find balance between career and family when she chose to open a small flower shop. Conversely, Patricia begrudgingly allowed her life choices to foster an imbalance that made her feel like she should walk with a limp.

She closed her eyes to hold back tears that suddenly threatened to pour forth as her uninvited emotions slammed her. Would it ever cease, she thought, caught off guard by her reaction to the private account of two strangers who reminded her that she continually focused on what she lacked rather than giving credence to what she had acquired as result of her hard work.

Stop it! Choices, she thought, I have choices. She opened her eyes and redirected her thoughts to her grandmother's diary. But she didn't find much comfort there either.

Her grandmother's entries were, at times, deeply intimate and private as her passionate relationship with Tom so dramatically contrasted that of either Naomi or Sasha. Her affiliation with the suffrage movement and Tom's support of her efforts had freed her to embrace her independence within their marriage. Grams was so lucky, thought Patricia. She had found her man amid a much more restrictive cultural dogma than Patricia faced. Although Grams had always talked openly about any subject Patricia broached, she realized in this moment that their discussions had always steered clear of marital expectations for Patricia. Perhaps Grams graciously avoided the subject because she knew that Barbie had berated her daughter repeatedly for her inability to find a suitable husband. Patricia smiled as she reminisced about Grams' continual encouragement of Patricia, which was laced only with solicited advice.

When she thought about her dating history, Patricia relinquished a little ground since her mother might have had reason for concern. Her one long-term, monogamous relationship had lasted only eight months and ended when Larry, the narcissistic artist, pressured her to elevate his needs to a higher priority level than her career. She ditched his hopes and the relationship when she realized that all the free-spirited idealism that her generation continually spewed could not erase a deeply imbedded truism from her male counterparts. The lessons ingrained over twenty-plus years of childhood and adolescence still resulted in voluntary and enthusiastic adherence to the paradigm of middle class America, when men discovered they paid too high a price to co-exist in a relationship based on equality.

Because she discovered the same scenario every time she moved past the initial stage in any relationship, she had resigned herself to not finding her version of Mr. Right. That is, until her pending birthday introduced a fear of missing out on motherhood. Could she settle for less? Would she settle for less?

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Wanting to erase that image from her mind, Patricia shifted her thoughts back to Sasha and Naomi. Sasha pushed aside the boundaries imposed on women of her time, when she convinced her grandfather to help her avoid the potential for the life her mother lived. Having been taken in by Naomi's mother after she was brutally raped and impregnated, her mother had died in childbirth. Sasha and Naomi were born only days apart and were raised as sisters. In spite of the luxuries afforded her, Sasha saw the duplicity of life for women of her time and seized the opportunity to break free.

Patricia saw a little of both women in her grandmother, whose diary revealed that although she had no choice as to her repressive childhood, she sought to create a better life for herself within the dictates of her own society. Surely she too should be able to run, as her grandmother and Sasha had, from what she abhorred in her own parents' relationship. Why couldn't she find the relaxed camaraderie and shared responsibilities of her grandparents' marriage that so contradicted the stiff formality of her parents' interactions?

Resigned to staying awake, Patricia sat up and reached for her grandmother's diary, hoping to find some answer. Turning to an early entry, she reread it.

October 7, 1928

Naomi and Sasha reinforce for me that we all must face the unknown, regardless of the choices we are presented with in our lifetime. I am no different. I chose my husband and married based on blind faith that love would endure after a relatively short courtship. I accepted Tom's proposal to escape my father's tyrannical rules and I could rely only on my intuition that I had found my father's opposite.

I think the atrocities of the war molded Tom. Unlike others who returned hardened and bitter about their future prospects, Tom told me that he thought I was his reward for a battle well fought. Says I remind him what life has to offer, if we open ourselves to the possibilities. I am glad I took the risk because our four beautiful children were conceived in love and I cherish that love without regret.

October 10, 1929

Naomi creates equally as much potential for heartache and loneliness as I would expect Sasha to encounter as she refuses to let anyone take care of her. Naomi's marriage makes me wonder if my mother married for reasons other than love. She never talks about a courtship or romance, and I wonder when my father first revealed his true character as a self-serving authoritarian who continually berated her to make himself feel important.

Despite her less than opportune marriage, she found her voice in the suffrage movement. At great personal risk, she worked for rights she might never enjoy, and she exposed me to those women, so I could strive for a better life. One of my greatest joys came the day she finally stood her ground, because he could no longer bully her with threats against us.

I see that same feisty spirit exemplified in the suffragettes, who champion the rights of women every day. Sasha certainly exemplifies the fantasy of

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adventure, but my mother and Naomi found their wings of flight that subtly expressed their spirit for life.

They all taught me what women are capable of when diverse opportunities mold their personal development.

Patricia closed the book and held it to her breast. "I love you Grams. I know you have taught me to stand strong and now I understand a little better what instilled in you the strength you exemplify for me."

Patricia set the book on top of the others and reached to turn off the lamp on the table as the first sliver of morning sun appeared through a crack in the curtain. She stood and walked to the window to let in the light and then retrieved her wine glass from the table. As she rounded the corner, headed for the kitchen to brew some coffee, her briefcase announced itself as it connected with her foot. "Yea, Yea, I know! You take precedence over the rest of my day."

Monday proved difficult, mostly because she had to endure it before she could corral her grandmother and get some answers to her long list of questions. Her workload distracted her for the better part of the morning until she decided to take a walk and stretch out. In the break room, she observed two male co-workers conversing with a secretary and tried to imagine either of them changing a dirty diaper. The image didn't materialize beyond her initial thought, as the secretary flirted coyly and encouraged their attentions.

Disgusted, she walked out of the room wondering why men could so casually adapt their work environment to meet all their needs. The old paradigm, which encouraged fitting in, and left little room for speculation beyond that concept, seemed to work for men. But why?

Knowing she wouldn't find an answer, Patricia headed back to her desk and picked up a thick packet of market analysis she'd been avoiding all morning, and diverted her focus. She knew she was heading on a collision course if she didn't find her way to acceptance of her life, or the alternative that she truly was Barbie's daughter. Shirk the thought that the smell of baking bread could possibly be a beckoning call to succumb to domesticity and trade in the suit for an apron! Oh yuck! Get back to work. Even if she could buy into that thought process, she had no husband, no kids, and most importantly, no prospects on the horizon.

To defuse the replay of an overworked and fruitless line of thought, Patricia catapulted herself into a frenzied pace, allowing her to leave the office at 6:30 without taking any work home. Maybe she'd stumbled on a weapon in the male arsenal, she thought as she waited for the elevator and acknowledged the awkward nakedness she felt at having no baggage to lug with her. Perhaps she should just function on autopilot at optimum speed and race through life, disallowing any time for the emotional outbursts that invaded the idle moments.

Patricia willingly allowed the quiet to envelop her as soon as she opened the front door to Gram's house, knowing her tension would find no outlet in this place of comfortable slowness. She glanced into the living room as she headed for the stairs. The chic shabbiness of the living room furniture brought to mind the familiarity of her old, ratty bathrobe. She wouldn't want anyone to see

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her in it, but it enveloped and comforted her, accepting her tears and spilled ice cream like a badge of honor among comrades, unaffected by change.

Her mother, on the other hand, still updated and created a new look every few years according to the latest trends. It always reminded Patricia of a new shoe that invariably etched its identity with a blister before it adapted tolerably to the shape of the foot. Then it's on to the next rub.

The instant tension in her chest told her to let go of the uninvited thoughts of potential compliance, and she forced a smile, shedding a pound or two of that tension with each riser she cleared as she made her way upstairs. By the time she arrived at her grandmother's bedroom door, she had nothing left to strip away but her shoes, which she walked out of and allowed the plush shag carpet to curl around her toes and the bottoms of her feet.

"Hi, Grams. How was your day?" Patricia inquired as she leaned over to plant a kiss on her grandmother's forehead and sat down on the edge of the bed, folding one leg under the other as it dangled over the side. She set the diaries beside her.

"My day was wonderful. I entertained some friends this afternoon and my favorite rosebush shared a few of its most radiant reds." She motioned to a sample of her beloved roses that adorned her bedside table. "I have been anticipating your arrival all day."

"Grams, your little gift prompted a whole slew of questions for me."

"As I knew it would, but the answers would only make sense when the questions had formulated themselves around your own perusal. How are you for time this evening?"

"Believe it or not, I don't have a single thing to do when I leave here tonight. I had an attack of melancholy this morning about my life, or lack thereof, and attacked my work with a vengeance as a distraction. I was sinking to an all-time low when I started imagining myself following in my mother's footsteps."

Grams did not respond when Patricia paused, so she continued, "I think I finally understand why people dread their thirtieth birthday, because I feel like I am teetering on a high wire as the vantage point between my past and my future, frozen in fear."

As she talked, Patricia saw a familiar look taking shape on Grams' face that intermingled love and concern. "Don't be so hard on yourself, dear. Surely your glimpse into my past revealed how I floundered with my own choices along the way."

"Grams, your diary was quite informative. I thought I knew you until you gave me access to some your private life."

Grams smiled. "We must willingly take risks by exposing our innermost feelings about our circumstances as well as our choices. The trials and tribulations are often our greatest teachers because they test us and show us what we are made of."

"Take Sasha for example. Can you see in her writing, as well as her actions, that she took that lesson of her mother's rape as a warning to never let a man dominate her?"

She traveled the world, and never compromised her convictions. Had her mother lived longer, she might have helped her to find a compromise somewhere between absolute subservience and total independence."

"But, Sasha was able to maintain her independence because of the wealth she garnered from her grandfather. She would have been forced to give that wealth over to any man she married. By steering clear of any one country's law, she could maintain control over her life and her fortune."

Grams sighed and shook her head slightly, "Yes, and she paid a great price for that independence by never having children or a home on solid ground."

Excerpt

The Isiac Knot

By: Mona Goshen

"If you allude to similarities between me and Sasha, rest assured my life couldn't hold a candle to the adventurous life she lived."

"If we look closely at any person's experience, something will trigger us to find similarities to our own. I need not lead you to any conclusion. I simply attempt to point to the reason why the diaries exist."

"Perhaps Naomi's arranged marriage and restrictive life played into Sasha's choices throughout her life."

Grams nodded. "We can see in the past a mixed bag of options that were often withheld from women and the ensuing results. The diaries show us where women came from, how their plight affected our progress, and how we now perceive our lives in relation to the past. Think about it. Why do you suppose you are living the life you are living at this time?"

"To avoid having to live my mother's life."

"And you think your generation is so different in that regard than any that came before?"

"Well, we have made progress. Because we stand up for our rights, we have a say now that was withheld from women in the past."

"Bingo!"

"Oh, I guess that is a pretty profound placement of foot-in-mouth, huh?"

"Perhaps, but a common one. We charge into our twenties, probably the most tumultuous time of life, idealistically striving for goals, which we perceive will take us beyond the limitations of our mothers. But alas, the thirtieth birthday is the one with the deflated balloons because most of us realize we have fallen short of our goals, that restrictive dogma gets in the way, and we relate to the twenties as a time of failure rather than transition."

"Have you been riding around in my head the past few weeks? My life feels so uncompromising, and I feel as if I am reeling toward a dead end at the velocity of a runaway train?"

"Our thirtieth birthday is usually the first time we even consider looking back because we begin to experience remorse, doubt, even regret, and our future prospects loom uninvitingly as a result."

"So this messed-up existence I call my life is some cyclical process that perpetuates itself through every generation?"

Grams smiled "Yes, but each generation adds a new twist or two, giving the illusion of hope for a better life, labeling the endeavor as progress, and layering it on top of what came before. Over time, we bury the past beneath those layers until we can no longer recognize the cycles and the similarities."

"I find it difficult to envision you going through all the confusion and anguish I have created for myself, Grams, especially since your generation didn't initiate an all-out war on the male population."

"Ah, but you are mistaken, my dear. Many prior generations laid the groundwork upon which you stand. The suffragettes faced a formidable adversary that encouraged not only disrespect of women, but brute force aimed at curtailing our efforts. Your somewhat jaded perspective requires I back up a little and fill in the gaps. I see you brought the diaries with you."

"Yes, I want you to explain their purpose to me."

"I can't do that, but I will share with you what was shared with me and why I introduce them to you now. I am not certain how far back this legacy goes, but I know it has been a part of our family for many generations. As we come upon our thirtieth year, we are compelled to seek new

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approaches and find some purpose and meaning for our future. We hope to navigate on smoother waters, especially as we begin to accept the unpredictability of our lives."

"Like the detour I described. Somewhere along the way, I took a wrong turn and now I am lost without a compass, not sure where to go, or how to get there." Patricia removed her suit jacket and reclined across the end of her grandmother's bed as she spoke.

"Yes, but understand everyone is subject to their reality and reality molds our thinking and our perceptions. Although men must confront the same obstacles, women have been faced with a double whammy because we are not valued for what we contribute to society as wives and mothers. Women have been made to feel as if we are inferior, weak, and incapable of functioning without our male counterparts."

"But Grams, we are making headway as women. We have fought long and hard in the past decade and gained some credibility."

"Absolutely, but what lies ahead depends on how women handle themselves and how men receive them. It was important we let go of false dogma ingrained into us over hundreds of years to remember what was stripped away and kept from us.

Now, men must relearn to accept us as equal and not feel threatened by change. It is a process that will evolve over time."

"But we are not giving them a choice, now. We have staked out our ground and we won't give it up."

"So, is that why right now you question your role as it relates to the society in which you live?"

Patricia tensed slightly at the truth her grandmother spoke. "I just know I don't want to follow in my mother's footsteps, even though I am not sure what my future holds for me. I need guidance and answers, which have not yet materialized."

"You keep making my point for me. Progress begins with unrest, the source of which is sometimes not evident. Unrest leads to the pursuit of somewhat allusive answers. Although you are not sure which way to go, do you still think you made the right choices?"

"Most of the time, but I wonder sometimes if I can justify the pursuit of something I might not even want."

"The answers are available in rounds of history, but many perceive life as evolutionary rather than cyclical. The perpetuation of science and technology has served to convince us we are better off than those who preceded us. This dilemma is compounded because history was written almost totally from a male perspective."

"If that is the case, then how does history hold the answers?"

"That, my dear, is what our family legacy entails. The textbooks and archives in our libraries reflect the history of cultures and nations and the people who championed their causes. The history I just referred to is reflected in the everyday lives that were affected and molded by those causes, in particular those of women."

"Hence, the diaries."

"Yes, but also the perspective of women who observed the past while experiencing the impact of current events and changes."

"So, I will read these diaries and write what I think based on my life for the next thirty years?"

"No, that was my assignment. My mother gave me three diaries to read, just as I have done with you."

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The Isiac Knot

By: Mona Goshen

"Someone other than Sasha and Naomi wrote the diaries that your mother read?"

"Yes."

"I will receive my own diaries?"

"Yes."

"Where do I get my diaries? Do we have some pre-ordained section at the library that houses diaries for the women of our family to pick up every thirty years?"

"Not exactly."

"Grams, I was being facetious, but your response makes me wonder what you are up to. I think I should shut up and let you tell me everything you know. The floor is yours," Patricia pursed and zipped her lips to signify her intent to listen.

"My mother sent me to a bookshop on Garrison Street between Main and First Avenue. She told me to ask for Madame Ranier, who explained my assignment, took my mother's diaries, and gave me my own. I followed the same scenario with your mother just before her thirtieth birthday. When your mother declined the offer, Madame Ranier told me to wait for you and try again. Now I must ask you to go see her, so she can elaborate on your assignment. Then you will decide if you are willing to participate."

"This doesn't seem like a difficult task or require a huge time commitment, Grams. After all, you only wrote in your diary once each year. If I understand what happens, one of our ancestors set this whole thing up and put some shopkeeper in charge of making sure someone gives us our assignments?"

"That is probably the most difficult part of the decision process. The background prior to each mother's verbal account of her own assignment is as far back as anyone goes. You must be willing to do your part without ever acquiring any knowledge of what transpired before or what will come as a result of the work you do."

"But why?"

"Because there is a greater purpose to this project than any one person can handle in a lifetime and nothing is served by our knowing more. I cannot give you an overview because I don't have the whole picture, but, as a result of my participation, I am content with what I experienced."

"Is the shop still owned by the same family?"

Patricia saw the slightest wince on Grams face before she spoke, as if she knew more than she told, but she simply replied, "As far as I know. It is important you go before your birthday because you are expected."

"Do you think it is important I participate, based on your experience?"

"Yes, I do, but you must make your own choice without feeling obligated to me. I have only shed enough light to impart to you the importance of going to the shop and listening to your assignment with an open mind. Then you will decide."

"Why did my mother decide not to participate?"

"She thought the world was the best it could be, and she didn't see any reason to focus on someone else's history. There is no judgment, and it is a voluntary assignment. When you look at history in proportion to a few decades, each generation need not participate to keep the project moving along."

"Okay, give me a number so I can call this shop and set an appointment."

"No need. You can go anytime." Grams slumped against the pillows, looking relieved. "Now run along home. I am tired and I need to sleep. Thank you for indulging an old woman and remember, whatever your decision, I honor you for opening your mind to the possibility."

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By: Mona Goshen

Knowing she had been dismissed, Patricia sat upright and leaned over to kiss her grandmother. "Goodnight, Grams. I'll call you after I go to the shop." Patricia put on her shoes and gathered up the diaries. As she walked out of the room, Betty gazed after her lovely granddaughter.

Patricia's mind filled with mixed emotions and questions as she drove home, but she knew, even beyond her burning curiosity, she would take the next step for her grandmother, out of trust and respect.

And, she thought, Grams had certainly done a good job of peaking Patricia's curiosity. As she waited at a red light, she reached for her appointment book and perused her schedule for the remainder of the week, knowing one more turn of the page would reveal her dreaded birthday the following week. Not ready to confront it, she decided to get on with her commitment. Not too much open except late afternoon Tuesday. She decided it was a good time slot because she could go without cutting into other appointments, and she could report back to Grams on Thursday.

She arrived home early enough to watch a little television, a luxury she rarely allowed herself, but by the time she'd fixed a sandwich from the leftovers in the fridge and eaten, she decided to call it a day. Perhaps she'd read, she thought as she shed her bathrobe and crawled into bed. As soon as her head hit the pillow, her eyes drifted closed, the book still clutched in her hand without even turning out the light.

A caravan moves toward the gates of a city like a snake slithering toward an opening in the rock. People, mostly men, walk in small groups, conversing. Everyone seems lighthearted. Near the front of the caravan, several men, holding on to poles, are carrying a draped coach.

A beautiful woman peaks out from the curtained enclosure. Her eyes are dark, almost black, and her skin is tanned to a dark brown. She wears a white gauze veil that drapes around her face to hide all but a portion of her jet black hair, which is parted on one side and swept across her forehead.

The smile in her eyes radiates and she's obviously happy to see someone. A man near the front of the caravan turns to smile back at her. He's robed in a full-length muslin tunic, and his dark curly locks peek out around a turban-style wrapped hat, which is positioned on his crown.

She pulls back inside the coach where she is seated on cushions amid beautiful purple sheer fabric, embellished with metallic ribbons and bangles, which make a crude musical sound that seems to announce the rhythm of the eight men who walk in a strict unison to keep the coach stable.

The woman is not alone. She is accompanied by another veiled woman. "I've heard so much about this city from Hamaresh, and I'm happy he finally consented to bring me along. I suspect the Pharaoh's request to meet me might have something to do with it. That, and Hamaresh has talked repeatedly about some important proposition the Pharaoh wants to discuss."

Her companion stretches her arms above her head and turns from side to side as she replies, "Oh, Pheobe, I certainly hope it doesn't involve a destination more distant than Sanai, because I don't think I could bear to sit in this tiny compartment traveling across the desert much longer than we have already endured."

Both women fanned themselves as they talked. "I trust Hamaresh wouldn't subject us to hardship beyond what we can handle. I rather enjoyed this trip. I could get used to it."

"I don't know that you would feel the same way if you had children to tend."

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By: Mona Goshen

“We’ll just have to see what comes of his meeting with the Pharaoh.” Pheobe pulls back a portion of the curtains on both sides of the carriage, fastens them to the corner hooks, and leans back against her pillows, fanning herself and watching the terrain on either side.

The man from the head of the caravan comes running up to the coach. “Pheobe, come out for a moment. I want you to see the vista before you get too close to appreciate the splendor. He takes her hand as she steps out and helps the other woman out as well. Then he points to his left. The magnificence of what they encounter is a structure so immense it filled their entire view. Pheobe’s mouth drops open at the site. “Oh, Hamaresh! It is as tall as a mountain, but a mountain wouldn’t have such symmetry and smoothness.”

Pheobe looks at her husband to see him smiling, his eyes twinkling with delight at her reaction. “I knew my descriptions could never do justice to the great pyramids, Pheobe. I knew you would just have to see them for yourself. Now you know why I wanted you to step out of the coach. I wanted you to see it from here the first time so it will be a memory you’ll never forget.”

“And you have achieved your purpose. I’m utterly awestruck. It’s as if I’m seeing a figment of my imagination.”

“It’s very real, I can assure you, but you would only appreciate it fully if you see it from this perspective first. Now back inside. We’re off to the palace. The Pharaoh has surely been apprised of our arrival and awaits us. We shouldn’t keep him waiting.”

The two women reluctantly climb back in their enclosure, and immediately open the curtains on the front of the coach so they can see the pyramid and the city coming into view.

The sheer magnitude of the pyramid, spanned out across the desert and up into the sky to dwarf the city in the foreground. The sides, at least from this distance, were absolutely smooth with no windows, no ledges and no apparent deviation in the texture of the stones. All four sides moved upward to touch the sky at a pinnacle perfectly centered between the sides of the base.

“I can’t believe it! Nothing I’ve ever encountered could even begin to compete with such magnificence,” Pheobe squeals as she cranes her neck to keep the pyramid in her line of vision as the caravan continued.

“What is this strange land we have come to, Pheobe?” her companion asks.

“Your guess is as good as mine, but I have a feeling we’re going to have fun finding out. Hamaresh tried to describe the beauty of this city and the unique ways of its people, but my imagination could not comprehend what we are seeing right now.”

She stops speaking abruptly, and her mouth drops open in awe as the caravan comes to the city’s entrance, a towering wall with huge wooden gates, flanked on either side by two statues. Their immensity was intensified by the sense of power and strength they exuded. Carved from stone, the lines were simple but revealed lean, muscular arms bearing instruments held across their chests. They stood on stone platforms as sentries putting forth a welcome with the slightly upturned corners of their mouths and a somewhat benevolent look in their eyes. And yet, their sheer magnitude towering over the crowd seemed to project another message to all who passed between them, warning they won’t tolerate anyone who arrives with intent on malice.

“I’ve heard of the craftsmanship of these people, but I didn’t expect what I see before me.” Pheobe again cranes her neck out of the coach to take in the full height of the statues. “Who could hone such beauty out of a rough piece of stone?”

Her companion chimed in, “They appear to have grown out of the ground right where they stand. How could such weight be moved by men?”

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By: Mona Goshen

Pulling back into the coach as they continue on their way, they enter a marketplace surrounded by buildings, seeming to fit as if designed to compose a mosaic platter, a rhythm. She makes eye contact with the people along the way who look up from their work in the stalls that lined the streets. They work on every type of craft, some she recognized and others she'd never seen. Everyone is busy, appearing to have a productive focus, and they comfortably occupy their spaces that accommodate their tasks. And yet, they look up and smile as the caravan passes by, as if they expect its presence, as a routine intrusion and not an invasion of their privacy.

As they pass a man intently working with a hammer and chisel, tapping away at a small bit of Lapus Lazui, Pheobe touches the necklace at her throat that contains the same stone. "It was a gift from Hamaresh when he returned from his last trip to Sanai. He described in great detail how he had overseen the process and worked with the Pharaoh's personal stone masons and jewelers to design and craft the entire piece."

"I've always admired it."

"I didn't really understand all the symbolism behind the design and placement of the stones as he had attempted to explain the Egyptian emphasis on every detail, as it relates to nature, and the wearer's attachment to nature. But I do appreciate the intricacies of the inlaid stones and the finely crafted gold collar that fits my neck so perfectly. I often wonder if Hamaresh secretly took my neck and shoulder measurement while I was sleeping.

"The beauty of the piece is only rivaled by the warmth I feel in my heart for my husband's lavish gesture in showing me the beauty that results from his work and the craftsmanship of the Egyptians."

As the caravan continues through the streets of the city, they encounter another tall wall and an opening into a courtyard. This entrance is flanked by two more statues; this time they are women rather than men. Their gowns are more flowing and draped in a fitted way that exudes femininity. They are winged. Arms spread out directly perpendicular to their bodies in a way that creates an arch for those who enter to pass beneath. They wear collars much more elaborate than the one at Pheobe's neck but no less real. The stone they were sculpted from was milky white and contrasted the colorful splay of their jewelry. Snakes wrapped their arms, as if to hold the wings in place, and the intricacy of the jewelry adorning the bodies and the band around the head still pale in detail to the wings. Each feather lines up in perfect unison with every other one in the spans.

Pheobe leans out to see more as the coach passes beneath these winged women. As she pulls back into the coach, she speaks, with a bit of anxiety in her voice. "Did you feel that?"

"Feel what?"

A strange look came over Pheobe's face as she spoke. "I'm not sure," she said as she rubs her arms. "For some reason, I felt a tingling feeling and a chill as we passed under those statues. It was like the feeling I get when I sit on the cliffs in Phoenicia and stare out at the sunset dancing across the steely, black water as it kisses the horizon with a burst of oranges and pinks and yellow before dropping off into the place where sea and sky become one. I guess I'm just overwhelmed by this incredible experience."

Once they clear the arch of the winged statues, they see a transformation in their surroundings. Pheobe calls out to her husband. "Hamaresh, wait." He turns to face her, having moved ahead twenty feet.

"What do you need? We are close to our final destination."

"It is so beautiful. I'd like to walk with you." Hamaresh immediately motions to the men to stop and then reaches to take his wife's hand. As she steps down she turns her head back toward the

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arch. The details of the statues and the feathers on the back side were just as exquisite as they had been from the front. Beyond the bustling marketplace is now just a picture framed by the winged arch. On this side, a trellised wall around the edge of the statues carried a flowering vine, curling around the bases that hold the stoic figures. The grounds are sculpted and manicured. She also notices only a few footmen accompanied her and Hamaresh. The remainder of the caravan had not followed them into this courtyard.

People stroll in the manicured gardens, conversing as they walk, or sit on benches perfectly placed to create an air of peaceful serenity, which dramatically contrasts the bustling marketplace they had just passed through.

Hamaresh speaks, as if on cue, to answer unformulated questions. “We have entered the grounds of the palace. The Pharaoh expects us.” He takes Pheobe’s hand and as they turn, they are confronted with a complex of pillared buildings, surrounding the garden on both sides.

“What are all these massive buildings?”

“These are the temples. I’ve not been privileged to enter them, but I’ve heard that the priests and priestesses are very powerful in this culture. The Pharaoh depends on their contributions to make all his decisions. And because these people value all that nature has to offer and incorporate that nature into all they do in life, the Pharaoh has come to appreciate all that I bring him from the great mines to the east.”

“Why doesn’t he just send his own people rather than trading with foreigners?”

“What I’ve come to understand, after making this trip so many times, is that the Egyptian people, while they are very proud of their culture and their customs, believe they showcase the wonders of the world in such a magnificent way that all who pass this way will be mesmerized and seek to be a part of it. They welcome foreigners who often become residents of their great cities and contribute to the commerce as they acclimate to this way of life.”

He pointed to a group of men standing near one of the temples. “Look over there. See that man whose skin is the color of ebony?”

“Yes.”

“He is Nubian. He comes from the southern region, which lies ten times further away than where we came from. His people are strong, much bigger and more muscular than the Egyptian people. As a result, they take on the role of protectors and make up a very large percentage of the army that serves the Pharaoh. They also assist in the building of these massive structures, emphasizing the Egyptians’ love of structural beauty.”

“That’s evident by the huge structure I saw earlier. But even such a strong race would face grave danger and challenges to build it.”

“I’ve often wondered at the feats they accomplish as well, but I’ve never received an answer to my questions. I usually just meet blank stares, as if the question needn’t be asked.”

They continue along through the columned buildings on an intricate stone path, inlaid and carved with interesting shapes, until they arrive a structure of stone, similar in design to the buildings leading up to it, but with a somewhat overriding presence that sets it apart. Pheobe comments as she points to the building, “I can’t put my finger on it, but it’s as if this building calls out, beckons us to enter.”

Hamaresh squeezes her hand and smiles. “I keep telling you this is a magical place.” The entrance was lined by statues, even more magnificent than those they’d already passed. The symmetry, the size and placement of such large statues that towered over her, even before she was close enough to tilt her head back, had a similar appearance in that all were dressed and adorned.

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By: Mona Goshen

They held various instruments and what might have been weapons, but just as with the prior statues they had encountered, these exuded a peaceful sense of strength as well.

“Pheobe, are you listening?” She turns to her husband, realizing she hasn’t been listening.

“I’m so sorry. I’m just so taken aback by the beauty I see. I’m overwhelmed. Nothing you described when you returned from your journeys could have prepared me for what I see before me.”

“These are incredible people, Pheobe. I don’t even pretend to understand myself.”

“I feel as though I’ve been transported to a magical place, and while I desire to understand it, I don’t know that I ever will.”

“Very well, then as I was trying to explain, let’s pick up the pace and get to the palace before the Pharaoh thinks we have decided to sell his treasures on the street.”

“Why did you leave the caravan outside the gate?”

“Look around, Pheobe. This is not a place for the ruffians I hire to protect my caravan. They will enter the palace complex from the side and drop off all the goods before moving on to the campsite.”

As they move again toward the palace, a procession of people exit one of the temple buildings. They proceed slowly and methodically just ahead of Pheobe and Hamaresh, obviously moving toward the same destination. A small line at the front of the group moves single file, each carrying a different article directly in front of their chests. A beautifully dressed woman proceeds behind them, followed by a group of about twenty women who walk two across in a symmetrical line behind the one woman. Although the group appears solemn, they also have a sense of purpose, as if they were a part of a ceremonial process.

Hamaresh follows Pheobe’s gaze. “And that my dear is the Queen. You will meet her later.”

“I can’t expect such an honor.”

“You’ll soon find out these people don’t put themselves above their subjects. They are quite comfortable in their roles and view each person as having a purpose and a role to fulfill. And, because I’ve gained such favor with the Pharaoh, we’ll stay at the palace. This invitation was offered at the direction of the Queen as soon as she heard I’d decided to bring you on this trip.”

“Based on the size of the city and number of inhabitants who I suspect live here, and what I saw this morning, I can’t imagine a person of her importance would have time to meet such a lowly person as the wife of a foreign caravan trader.”

“And that very statement shows how naive you are to the ways of these incredible people.”