

# Part 1

*The Primordial Power is ever at play.  
She is creating, preserving, and destroying in play, as it were.*

Heinrich Zimmer

## I. Smell of Soil

### *Aotearoa, 2023*

The storm hadn't passed yet. The southwestern wind ripped through the landscape and tugged at every tree and plant, taking with it the dust and soil of last summer. *Reckless*, Sera thought. *It must have nothing else to do.* She followed the wind as it shook in the treetops and caught leaves and earth, which it threw into the air again and again. She was comforted by the thought that the wind couldn't possibly win. Not all could be taken away by the wind. The trees stood firm and invincible in the fields and foothills. As always.

A strip of sunlight flickered and danced across her face, tickling the inside of her eyes and making it difficult to look. The light reflected off the side view mirror, when a hill didn't stand in the way for the sun. She loved light. Sometimes, the godly travelings of the sun made her wonder. Whenever it hit her face, she would usually close her eyes. And she would travel too, seeing faces or patterns behind her eyelids. Often they would be faces of distant people that she hadn't seen before; once she had seen a woman who looked a lot like her grandmother. She had the same eyes and that kind, loving smile. The patterns were that of maps or circular drawings. When the flickering went away, she looked at the world again through the side view mirror. She loved this game. Everything was small, confined to her size, almost within her grasp, yet always fading and renewing itself. The world was small and safe enough to fit in a box.

They drove up and down the ongoing hills of Southwest Auckland. The farmers' soil lay bare, ready for another winter, anticipating another spring. She and her mother had been planting sweet potatoes, green beans, tomatoes, carrots, parsley and onions this year. She remembered the feel of the slippery, cool soil, dark like the shiny, black sand at Kare Kare beach. She would get up early in the morning just to watch her plants grow. Her mother didn't believe her, but she had seen them. Their movements, a slight rustling as they greeted another day. She missed those mornings. Now, there were only a few weeds and the old, dusty scarecrow with the pipe in its mouth and the two button eyes that looked like old ladies' earrings, like the ones her kindergarten teacher Miss Porter would wear. The vegetable garden was bare. It was waiting for the sun to come back with its warmth and strength to make the world grow and twirl around itself like a merry-go-round at the summer fair. She watched the world in the winter, and it slowed down and became calm. The rivers and the ocean slowed down, breathed less. It was only when the winds

set in, the world stirred and even then, she felt the stillness of the world as if in a vacuum surrounded by the cold wind. She would wait with joy for another spring to arrive. She would watch for it every morning.

She looked at her mother seated behind the steering wheel of their old, rusty Volvo. Her slim hands rested confidently on the wheel. Long, almost green lines ran like cold rivers through that pale, almost translucent skin. She wondered what lay beyond those lines, beyond what was visible; why her mother's hands could rest so calmly on the wheel as if they weren't part of her, and were in fact controlled by something else than her. She kept her eyes on her mother's hands, to stay alert if any changes happened and to avoid looking at her mother's eyes filled with black and red strings.

"Sera dear, what are you looking at?" her mother suddenly asked. Sera's eyes were still absorbed in the rivers of her mother's hands.

"Nothing," she said automatically and looked up timidly for a short moment. Her mother released a little smile, and her red eyes lit up for a second.

"Now, when we get to Grandma Ea's place, I hope I can leave you alone for an hour or so? Will you be all right while I spend some time with Ea? Perhaps Grandpa can take you for a walk down to the water? Or you can go into the lavender room, which I know you like so much."

The child smiled and nodded to all of her mother's questions, and thought her mother looked happier already. They passed through another area of houses, gardens and great open fields. The land became flatter; they were driving out of the hills and mountains. Her grandparents lived near Manukau Harbor on Little Truia Hill in a big house called Prema, which meant 'love' in Hindi, her Grandma Ea had told her. Sera opened her car window slightly and inhaled the air coming through. The smell of ocean, wind and sun entered her nostrils. A clearness that filled her with a tingling sensation.

As they entered the village, the three-story house with all of its bay windows, spires, and extravagant rooftops rose above everything on the small hill like the castle of some faraway past that she imagined from the many fairy tales her Grandma Ea had read to her. If she turned her back to the house and stood at the top of the steps, she could see big bodies of water and green hilly land in all directions. It was like standing on top of the world looking out, breathing in all of its glory. The world had such vastness, so much air and free space that it made her a little dizzy.

Only on special occasions they would all, her mother, father and her go into the city where the tall buildings and hard concrete grounds shielded them from most weather and green, flowery hills. Here the air was busy in a different way. The many people rushing back and forth, looking at windows, talking, eating, staring at each other would keep her mind busy in another way than the water, hills and trees. She looked at them crowding in the streets. They were unaware of being so close together. She was mostly curious about their songs, which rang so beautifully in her heart, were as close to her as those of the sun, ocean and plants. They always made her want to return, though by the end of a city day, she welcomed their small house in the foothills where her mother or father would read to her and tug her in. On nights

like these coming back from a day in the city, when the lights were turned off, her room would be steeped in silence, and she couldn't fall asleep right away. She would jump out of bed, remove the curtains and look out her window onto the stars, if the sky was clear, or at the faint lights of the bustling city on the horizon, reminding her of the many faces and their songs. And she would listen to the nocturnal songs of the world, and dream of other places, other people with other songs to sing.

Grandma Ea greeted them at the doorsteps.

"Hello, beautiful women!"

She opened her arms and they both slipped into her embrace. Pressed up against their tall bodies, Sera watched how light came through the cracks between their legs. They stood there for a long time, longer than usual. When they let go, Sera could see that her mother was crying again.

"And how're you doing, love?" Grandma Ea's face appeared next to hers, bending down to her height.

She took her hands and looked long and intensely into the little girl's eyes. Her grandmother had bright, blue eyes and a slim, straight nose, which Sera admired. Sera nodded. She was bewildered by the direct attention of her Grandma Ea, who usually would be too involved in everyone around her to notice Sera much.

"Such a delightful bundle of energy and will, you are, Sera," Grandma Ea said and pinched her cheeks her gently. "You are very capable, little fire spirit... and when the storm sets in...oh, what is this?" Grandma reached out her hand to her, as if grasping for something, which was floating in air.

"Mom, let her be," her mother interrupted and pulled Sera's hand to her.

And that was the end of that. Sera had watched her grandmother talk to people in that way before. It had such a soothing effect. She had a way of caressing people only by speaking to them and looking into their eyes. Often the people she had spoken to would leave the room, looking very different. But her mother had told her it was all nonsense that little girls shouldn't worry about.

They walked into the house, her Grandma in front, all-quiet with her back to the two of them. Sera was curious about her Grandma. In the small hallway, they took off their shoes and put them in the crowded shoe rack, where sneakers, Wellington boots, hiking boots, sandals and other shoes were piled up like fire wood her father would chop for the fireplace.

Sera looked up the great staircase leading to the second floor where her grandparents and the other residents of the house had their bedrooms. A woman dressed in a long, shiny blue dress was standing at the top of the stairs; she waved to Sera and her mother. She had long, blond hair reaching to her bottom, and her eyes were painted blue and black. Sera looked at her admiringly from the base of the stairs.

"Hello", her mother mumbled.

They walked past the staircase into the big kitchen at the end of the narrow hallway. From the big window in the kitchen, they had a view of the small town of Truia, its many little houses, the hills and the

mountains that you had to cross before getting to the black sand beaches on the most western part of Auckland. In the middle of the room there was a big, heavy oak table, which all of the house residents sat around for dinner and house meetings. Grandma Ea had made tea and cookies for them, and they sat down at the table. For a long time nobody spoke. Sera could hear the wind outside tugging in the trees and the roof of the house. Sera wasn't sure what they were waiting for, but saw her chance to eat as many cookies as she wanted without the two women noticing. They were her favorite kind, oatmeal with chocolate chips and raisins.

"Is Grandpa in?" her mother asked reluctantly, while she stared out the window.

"He'll be here soon. You know, he can never get here on time?" Ea answered and smiled indulgently.

"Mia, would you like to go for a walk later on? Or we can just sit here, if you like. I know, Ursula is the only one home today, and she won't be coming down for a while."

Her mother didn't reply and Ea remained silent after that.

Then Grandpa Mihai finally came home. They heard the door close and his footsteps in the hallway. He was a big man, with firm, strong legs and feet. Sera could always tell when he was in the house. When he entered the kitchen, he went straight for her and picked her up in one motion, whirling her halfway around the room. She shrieked with excitement and fear.

"How is my favorite granddaughter, today?" he said in his funny way, rolling the r's and singing the vowels. She was the only granddaughter he had, but she liked that he had forgotten that. And she laughed and shrieked away.

"Hello, Mia," he said across the table, when he had put down Sera and kissed her on her cheek.

Sera thought his arms had the same effect on her as his lips. They swept her away to a comfortable place. He didn't hug her mother, just gave her a brief kiss on her cheek.

"So what would you like to do today, Sera? It's just you and me for a little while."

Grandma Ea and her mother didn't say anything. They smiled to Mihai and Sera as they left the kitchen. Out in the hallway, after having closed the kitchen door, Grandpa picked her up again. She had become far too big to be picked up, but she didn't mind with her Grandpa. It was only, when he picked her up or when he placed her on his lap that he would tell her stories and talk to her. Mostly he wouldn't say anything and stay in the background to let the women do the talking. It was rare the two of them had time together.

"Sera, will you promise me something?" he asked gazing into her eyes. His eyes were dark as the soft soil.

Sera nodded and smiled. He put her down again and took her hand. They walked into the living room where the fireplace was. It wasn't cold enough yet for fires, but she saw a small pile of wood already sitting next to the fireplace.

"Come sit here on my lap," he said and sat down on the soft couch, which stood next to the large

coffee table and a pile of pillows and cushions for people that attended lectures and teachings in the living room.

He smiled to her silently for a while. It felt comforting to sit here with Grandpa. She couldn't imagine any other person she would want to do that with.

"Sera, will you promise me to be extra mindful these next couple of weeks? Pay extra attention to what you usually pay attention to. What was it you said the other day? I remember you told me you could see the grass growing. I like that," he said and smiled amused.

"Keep your mind on those little things that make you laugh inside. And take good care of your mother. She will need your presence and your high spirit, though she might not say anything about this. Just remember she loves you, my dear, whatever she might say or do. I know, you can hear things in that brilliant head of yours, my gifted granddaughter! The stars were auspicious, when you were born," he said and laughed a little at these last words.

Sera nodded and thought how many strange things could make sense, when she sat on his lap. Grandpa had never been like any of her classmates' grandfathers, but she still loved him the most of them all. He made her laugh, and when he spoke, he spoke to her. She was special, though she didn't know why. It only mattered, because it mattered to him.

They sat for a while on the couch in silence. If she looked over his shoulder, she could see patches of the ocean, turning and rolling itself over. Endless movements. And she thought about going fishing with her father. It would be too windy to go today, unless they went to a lake up north. In the summer just passed they had gone out in the small dingy at French Bay, just the two of them early on a Sunday morning. The sun was rising as they drove up and down the hills. She had watched its rays in the rear mirror and over her shoulder in the car.

"So, I think, we are going to make a great catch today, don't you, sweetie?" her father had said and smiled, his hands on the wheel.

He had strong and rugged hands to lift and push heavy pieces of wood with ease, fillet a fish in a swift movement, and carry her effortlessly when she became too tired to walk, or when they had to cross steep waters. He had hands that were unafraid of the world, never hiding, always working.

"Yes, dad," Sera had said and nodded.

They had spent the whole morning in the boat, waiting for the fish to bite. It wasn't until noon, they caught a couple of snappers and a small codfish big enough to bring home. It had been a small victory coming home with a catch for mom to put in the oven and cook for dinner.

Grandpa Mihai pushed her gently off his lap, took her hand and got up from his seat. He put his index finger to his mouth, and they walked out of the living room, into the hallway and up the stairs. She could hear muffled voices coming from the kitchen. She thought she heard her mother crying. She had to

make a special effort to keep up with his long and swift legs, and soon the sounds of her mother disappeared. Upstairs they went to the lavender room, where she had seen her grandparents sit for hours in cross-legged positions with their students or by themselves. They called it meditation, focusing inside as they closed their eyes.

There was nobody in the room today. It was her favorite room. She loved the color of the room, especially in the afternoon, when the sun entered the one small window in the room. It cast such a mellow, soothing light. Everywhere on the floor, there were pillows and blankets to sit on. Grandpa took a pillow and sat down on the floor. He was still silent. Before he closed his eyes, he smiled to her, and in his eyes she saw the stories of knights, princesses and dragons unfold. And for a while he took her away to a different world altogether.

Sera walked over to the window. She had become familiar to the ways of her grandparents. Sometimes, they simply took off, but not in a cruel way. Sitting close to Grandpa, she would feel just as safe as if he had been awake, talking to her. She sat down on the windowsill and looked out. Huge clouds were forming out in the horizon. It looked like rain, but not for certain. Clouds came and went many times during the day. There was no telling about the clouds.

After a little while she went back to her Grandpa, sat down too and closed her eyes. She meant only to sit for a minute or two, imagining she could do what Grandpa did, and soon she found her mind spinning around in all kinds of colors and shapes, as if there was something else than her mind. Two parts, one looking at the other. With her eyes shut, she could still see where she was. She was no longer in the lavender room, but some other part of the house, or perhaps not part of the house at all. Then she noticed the voices. There was her mother's voice and her father's. Others too.

<It is critical...good catch, Sera...he was a good man...killed in an accident...left wife and kid behind...poor family>

*What does that mean?* She thought and opened her eyes.

*She will need your presence and your high spirits, though she might not say anything about this. Just remember she loves you, my dear, whatever she might say or do. I know you can hear things in that brilliant head of yours, my gifted granddaughter!* She heard her Grandpa Mihai say again. She remembered every word. *But what did it really mean?*

The little girl lifted herself, and looked at her Grandpa sitting in deep thoughts on the floor. *Did he see or hear the same things?* She decided that he probably didn't want to be disturbed. She left the small room and walked downstairs, stepping very carefully, not to disturb anybody. The house was quiet now like

inside her head. Outside on the small front porch, she sat down on a chair and looked out, as far as her eyes could go. The wind had hushed down and lulled itself back to sleep. The white caps on the waves were gone. She could only see a few boats out there, but large groups of wind-surfers raced on the surface of the water, their sails bulging with the remaining wind.

Something fluttered just above her; she saw it out of the corner of her eye. It had purple, blue and black petal-like wings with soft edges of light green and fine black lines running through all of the distinct colors like veins. It flittered in a way that made it feel like it was talking to her. She had never seen anything like it. She followed it with her eyes and had to move around in her seat. Soon the butterfly started moving away from the porch down the hill towards the water. She got up and caught up with its slow, sporadic flight. A delicate flower of the sky. Down the lawn, through the bushes and onto the road. The butterfly never came out of sight, and never rose too high for the little girl to continue her pursuit of it. At times, she felt like she flapped a pair of wings and lifted above the grounds.

A long time passed running after the butterfly. Sera was glad to be on her own, in her own universe with no grownups telling her what to do. The butterfly had run through other people's backyards, gardens and fields, deflecting the main road. Now, they arrived to it and had to cross it. She lingered for a long time on the edge of the asphalt, staring at the blue and purple being taking off, going into the bush that appeared on the other side. She couldn't let it go, she had to be with it. A car passed by her and another. She looked to both sides. To her left she could see the water, now completely restful, waving only slightly the way she liked it the best. To her right, she knew was the direction to her grandparents' house. In one sudden movement she ran across the road and emerged safely among the fern trees and undergrowth of ferns on the other side. Everywhere there were soft green lines. Even the light coming from above through the crowns of the trees was green.

There was no sign of the butterfly, still she continued with determination. Where would she go if she were a butterfly? She had been here before, with her Grandma Ea on one of their walks. This stretch of land reached all the way to the tip of Truia where land once again touched seawater. Truia wasn't a big town, and had once not so long ago been tiny and poor. It had all changed, when a nice harbor with a huge boat ramp had been built. Truia now attracted a lot of people, families and businesses from out of town, even the city. Soon people brought their stuff and settled down in the small town of Truia, which not only offered the joys of the sea, but also gave people great views of the inlet to the south and the mountains to the north, as it climbed its way up Truia hill.

Sera kept her gaze fixed on the butterfly, as she proceeded through the forest of Mamaku and Ponga trees. She followed the small bush path which soon led her to an open field. Somebody's piece of land. She walked along the rim of the property. She could see a herd of sheep grazing on the land. Then she spotted the purple, blue and green butterfly again, as a faint fluttering at the other end of the field. She ran as fast as her legs could go, still along the stretch of bush. Her heart beat fast, but not just from the running of

her feet.

On the other side, the land dropped quickly, and she had to slow down as she descended, using her hands and feet the way her father had taught her. They would often go hiking on the trails of Titirangi and along the beaches on the west coast, where the sand was black, the cliffs green, and the undertow dangerous for little girls. Going down she saw the sea again, now still as a field swaying in the breeze. She could still see the butterfly. Her heart ached so badly to be with it; feel its gentle petal-like wings. She imagined if she could only have it, take care of it and feed it, everything would be gentle and comforting again. She would be safe. She would never feel alone again.

Her legs and heart moved faster. She stumbled from time to time, but would get up quickly without a tear in her eye. She had dirt in her face, and on her clothes, even in her mouth; it tasted of salt and mushroom, she thought. It was no bother to her. All she cared for was the butterfly. In the distance, before the road and a few scattered houses, they were digging up the dark soil and building something. She could see long iron rails and other construction materials in huge piles around the area. It was very quiet today, nobody was working on the rails.

She stumbled once again, this time rolling down the last bit of the hill, pulling weeds and sticks with her. When she came to a halt she looked up, and saw it again. The faint gist of a being flitting above her. She couldn't tell anymore if it was real. Its beautiful colors, which she had never seen the like before, were so brilliant. She got up and reached her arms out to it.

"Don't leave me...don't go away...," she whispered, afraid to scare it away by her spoken words. "Please...."

It moved again, slowly this time, and she ran, her heart throbbing in her throat. And then it vanished, disappeared out of her sight.

"No, no," she called out, running through the dusty and rocky construction grounds.

A Tui, its metallic green plumage and its purple and bronze tints shining in the sun, its white collar-like throat quivering slightly, was ahead of spring collecting grass for its nest. When she suddenly appeared, it let out a couple of notes from sheer panic and flew up in front of her just in time to escape the commotion on this still Sunday afternoon. She knew about the Tui, they would sing in her garden and stayed close to human beings, some even living off fruit that was put out to them. Not this Tui though.

On any other day, she would have lingered to take a look at the bird, but not today. She kept running; so fast that she didn't see where she was going, until she stood in front of it. A large piece of concrete sewer pipe, which had been placed on the outskirts of the construction area. There was no longer any water running through it, or any pipes connecting to it, for that matter. An old man lived in it with his wire-haired, brown dog that had bushy, light eyebrows like its owner. He had put a mattress and his few belongings in there, where they were all protected from the weather gods.

"Hey, little girl!" the man said and stopped her with his arms.

The dog, wagging its tail excitedly, sniffed at her. The old man wore a big black coat and had a red, tanned face, with wrinkles and a thick layer of skin around his eyes, brows and chins. He smelled of decomposing leaves and food, before it turned into rich, dense soil. He held her wrists firmly, and looked at her through a pair of blue green eyes that looked like the sea on overcast and windy days with some swell, but no whitecaps.

"Take it easy. What's all the rush? Is somebody after you?" his voice rang kindly in her ears, and she slowed down inside. Her thoughts came back to her.

The dog barked a little, wagging its tail still.

"Have you seen the butterfly, Sir?"

He shook his head, and let go of her wrists, while he smiled.

"I saw this pretty butterfly, you must have seen it. It has purple, blue and green wings, Mister."

She pleaded with him.

"Doesn't sound like something you find around here. Sweetie, what are you doing so far away from your parents? Your dad must be worried?" the man said.

"Dad?" Sera replied and lingered in her mind, looking at the tip of her feet.

There was blood on some of her toes, where the straps of her sandals were fastened tightly around her foot. There were tubes fastened securely to her father's face and arms, so that he couldn't run away from his bed at the hospital.

"Dad is dead," the little girl finally said with a sigh, her heart sinking like a rock back to its proper place.

For a long time, neither one spoke. The world momentarily woke from its winter slumber, and she could hear the grass growing ever so slightly. She sadly realized the butterfly was gone, and dropped to her knees; her chest full of tears that still wouldn't be released. Hands reached out to her and guided her into a lap that felt warm like sand on a sunny day. They held her there, until the tears were released from their hiding place.

"Now, there. Let it all out, sweetie," the voice said and patted her hair.

She no longer minded the smell; it reminded her of working in the garden, soil under her nails, and plants in her hands. She no longer minded anything. The world had stopped whirling again and she felt winter all around her. Stillness.

"It will be all right, my girl," the voice said again.

She dared not open her eyes, and kept them closed under her sobbing. He had put her hands on his lap, where all his warmth came from.

"Stay here with me, I will take care of you, sweetie," the voice pleaded.

The dog had been running back and forth in front of them, and rose now on its back legs licking her hands.

She opened her eyes slowly. First she saw the dog's laughing face and the man's exposed skin. Then she saw that he had closed his eyes, his face hidden in a dreamy smile.

"Grandpa!" she yelled and jumped out of his lap.

"Where are you going, little friend?" the old man asked, when she pushed her way out of the pipeline, stumbling over some clothes and a little cup.

Her feet were aching from the cuts and it made it hard for her to move them. She wiped the wetness from the dog's saliva on the outside of her hands on her pants and tried to forget about the pain.

"Where are you going, little girl?" his voice reverberated inside the damp and cold concrete pipe.

She kept moving. The old man slowly got up from his small chair. She sensed his movements, the aching of his bones that slowed him down. The dog barked excitedly, but didn't pursue her. Once, she was out of his cave, she moved more steadily, regaining her breath and control. She didn't look back. She didn't have to, she could clearly see the old man bending over, reaching for his pants, while yelling at her with a voice so unlike the kind one she had heard before.

"I will catch butterflies for you, they always come here, ...," she heard him say and then soon his voice faded too the way her father's had done in the hospital.

They found her sitting on the dock in town. She had walked all the way to the bottom of the great Truia hill. Her feet, arms and legs were bruised, but she wasn't crying and didn't speak.

Her mother was angry with her.

"How could you just leave the house like that? I was terribly worried about you. How could you do that, Sera?" Her mother spoke harshly. She tried to bite off the last word, but it slipped out in irritation.

Sera looked back at her with her silent, open eyes. She had no words nor thoughts inside.

"You scared me! What were you thinking about? I thought, I would lose you too!"

Her grandparents had also come. They had all been searching the area together. They stood silently on the dock, behind her mother, watching her from a distance. They looked happy to see her. Her mother turned to them.

"I just can't ask for your help, can I? For once, I need your help, and this is what you give me?" her mother started crying, grabbing her child in one motion from her seated position.

"Let's go home, Sera."

Sera had been looking at the descending sun. It had painted the horizon in red, orange and pink colors, like flowers in their garden. She had thought of spring and the soil under her nails, which her mother always tried to scrub away. Secretly, she didn't want it to go away. She loved the smell of it, and it lay like a protection on her skin. She would feel like the soil; vibrant, calm and cool. Now, that everything had changed, she didn't know if the soil would ever feel the same again.

## II. City of Underground

*New York, 2023*

With the foul northeast winds came the poisonous spores flying into the wasteland of deserted streets, alleys, parks and buildings, and penetrated every little unprotected gap and crack in the asphalt and exposed buildings. It was said that everything was dead in the world above and that the spores were the last, invisible traces of a long past war. The last traces in the history of destruction among human beings. The former metropolitan city in all of its past glory still stood though. It had been given a second chance.

Underneath the dark, heavy sky, on Madison and 42nd, the wind caught a lonely piece of paper and threw it into the air, higher and higher, making it whirl around itself, then letting it go, it tumbled to the ground as quickly as it had been lifted up. Something was scribbled on the paper, a strange language from a different time and space, and like a bottled message it drifted, searching the streets for its recipient.

When the wind had retreated, leaving the grounds of the city in silence and solitude, a faint clatter of voices rose from the Underground, seeping into the air like a lost relic of a familiar past. Then the sound of heavy metal being pushed over the concrete, rumbled through Madison and 42nd like thunder. The street gasped in anticipation. For a moment, nothing happened. Silence penetrated everything as if time itself paused. The mouth to the Underground gaped into the timeless, poisonous grounds. A minute later, the first human head rose from the depths. Then another and another. Three men in heavy boiler suits wearing gas masks and hard hats surfaced. One helped the other to come through the sluice. Nobody spoke because of the heavy masks they were wearing, but they all knew where to go and what to do.

On the western side of Madison stood a collapsed, abandoned building. The men began to strip it of bricks, wood, and other debris material to be used later for other construction and maintenance of the Underground. All material was precious. Times were different from when the city lived in abundance. They loaded the material in small boxes, which they sent through the sluice. When they cleared the entrance to the basement of the building, they brought their tools and started digging like miners searching for gold. Their trade was to enlarge and construct the Underground, to make it as comfortable for its underground citizens as possible. They were employed and provided for by the Ustodians, who worked on creating a free world, not paved with gold, but secure and safe for everybody. Nobody would have to go to bed hungry or sick, they had promised. And nobody had to fear another war of death and

destruction. The world had lost its interest and energy in maintaining its many arsenals of bombs and other weapons. There were more urgent things to attend to now in restoring the world and picking up the pieces after its suicidal and self-destructive behavior.

So far the Ustodians had kept their promises in this new haven on the American east coast, still inhabited by people. The Final War had wiped out all other places on the East Coast. Most land stretching from the southern parts of Maine, all the way down to the northern tip of Florida, and inland to the western most parts of Ohio and Georgia, and the middle of Kentucky and Tennessee had been deserted by people and most other life. The Underground city would now serve as the port and heart of the east coast, with the help of the Ustodians and the new citizens of this city that once had attracted great beauty, art, and prosperity.

The three workers, together with a large number of other Ustodian employees, were content. They had everything and reasonable work hours, so the hard labor didn't bother them. They only worked when the winds and conditions allowed it; all the other time they spent at their leisure. They worked with silent, enthusiastic dedication. They had been told they were putting down the bricks for a better future without weapons, homelessness, needless suffering or struggles, and without religions, languages or money to fight over. A world of peace and equality. They were building a better world out of the ruins of the Final War.

In the midst of the nuclear smoke, nobody knew who had initially started the Final War, but a massive number of regions in the world had been destroyed. It could happen again, it was said, if mankind didn't stop desiring power and riches or fighting over whose God was the truest. They were aware. They had their lives dear. They wanted peace. Then better avoid the things that made people feel separate from one another. Then better be equals whatever the costs. They understood and kept their spirits high by remembering the promise of a better future, which was theirs if they worked for it. Sighted only by the wind and sun, the sound of their enthusiastic shovels and drills vibrated through the empty streets.

It was not until in the late afternoon that Doru, the youngest and strongest of them, found it. A small plant had pierced through the barren ground of the ruins, and around it circled, waiting, a group of insects, attracted by the living green, in search of food. He couldn't have been more than sixteen, but still his body was fully developed, muscles strong and vigorous, a youth full of promise. He carried his body with pride and strength. Bricks and debris hid the plant, and if he hadn't lingered to watch the faint light from the sun setting behind a thick, dark cloud, it would have been buried in a pile of bricks from his shovel.

He called over the other two men with his hand. They looked at it in wonder. It was a good sign, he contemplated behind his mask. The other two men quickly went back to their work. He stood there for a moment bent over the little life, his shovel still in his hand. The future was full of promise and prosperity. He touched the frail green leaves, so that a slight shiver ran through them. It was then he felt something vibrating inside the fading light, inside him as if he were the light touching the plant. He had traveled a

long way. This was the kind of peaceful lightness he had been looking for all his life. He felt it in his body, as if every atom was filled with a light. He had never experienced that feeling that the light, the timeless air and the green leaves gave him in that instant, in a wasteland of empty, endless streets.

Doru began his work again, promising himself to remember that new feeling. Everything in his life had become a new beginning since he had arrived. And he had gained a sense of freedom that he could never have imagined, if he had stayed behind. The world he had left on the other side of the Atlantic was in a worse condition, deteriorating, pulling itself up by its roots, and barely surviving the aftermath of the cruel bombs. He had been one of the lucky ones to survive and to be able to go onto the other side of the Atlantic. Like in most other places, there were dangers of contamination and worse. But still they had let many of them on board the great ship leaving for the land of myths of terror and freedom. He could have gone to Canada; they had landed there first. The spores had not contaminated Canada. They had been blessed; the winds never reached them. He had no doubt in his mind that he had to go further into the dark land. He had called it the dark land. After all, they had destroyed most of Central Asia and with it, parts of his country. Ironically, now this land had become his savior, providing him with freedom and a place to live.

The three workers labored all day, their bodies turning gray from the dust and sweat. Even through the thick masks the dust would penetrate, leaving a thin film on their skin, which was washed away with hard toil. When the twilight set in, they reentered the sluice and the warm Underground tunnels.

They went to the headquarters to wash the day's dust and work off their bodies in the washrooms set up for them. There was still water in the city, but very limited resources of it. The Ustodians had set up regulations on how much water a household could use. It was minimal. For the special workers the quota was much bigger. They were allowed washing once a day. It was a matter of hygiene, they said. He didn't mind their reasons, it felt good to feel the warm water run down his body, releasing all the dust, dirt and sweat, which had accumulated during the day.

Under the cold, dimly lit concrete ceilings, they joined in for one of the many songs that they had taught each other through the two years they had worked on creating this Underground city. Their hoarse, male voices clamored through the big open concrete cubicles with benches, drains in the floor, and water faucets, which they had to use until the construction of the bathrooms was finished.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me...  
I once was lost but now I am found,  
Was blind, but now, I see...*

*T'was Grace that taught...  
my heart to fear.  
And Grace, my fears relieved...*

*the hour I first believed...*

There were buckets and big metal containers resembling old bathtubs, in which the workers scrubbed their bodies with soap, made available for them. They helped each other fill the bathtubs or rinse their bodies with the buckets, while their voices echoed on the bare walls.

"Hey mate, want to come along to Maggie's?" Johnny asked Doru as they left the washrooms. Johnny had big, muscular arms and bright green eyes that hid behind thick leathery eyelids.

Doru shrugged his shoulders.

"Now, c'mon, we could use your smart company. Tell us some stories," one of Doru's coworkers said.

His name was Jim and he rarely said much. They would usually be sent out on the same assignments. Doru liked him, because he dared to look into people's eyes.

Doru walked with the other workers to their regular bar, where the air was thick with cigarette smoke, and beers were emptied without a second thought. They first had dinner in the restaurant part of the place.

"So do you think, there will ever be a world above the Underground again?" Stuart asked Doru from across the table.

He was the third man that had gone up with Doru and Jim that day. He was only a few years older than Doru, but already he looked like a man of thirty with his rugged beard, and his weather-beaten cheeks and nose.

Doru nodded.

"Doru found this plant today up on the Grounds. It was sitting right there. Amazing! I say. I figure we will soon be walking the Grounds again. No worries," Stuart said and cheered.

"Cheers, everybody!" Stuart started and soon everybody was bellowing through the restaurant.

After dinner they went into the bar and continued their drinking. Some of the men were telling jokes and the alcohol and the cigarettes opened up for a constant laughter piercing through everything. Doru only had a couple of beers and kept a low profile as usual. Jim came over a couple of times to talk, but their conversation always went back to an awkward silence. Doru didn't care too much for the bar scene. Sometimes, he would meet other people there, to times women would come, and he would be interested in staying. Tonight, it was just the usual crowd, so he decided to leave early.

He thought about what Stuart had said and that all he longed for was to go back to another job on the Grounds. In the presence of the green life and the rays of the sun, he felt a joyful peace. He wanted to feel that again. In the company of his fellow workers he felt content, but never complete. He just didn't belong.

He walked down the Underground passages on his own. He wanted to get back to his little room

downtown. He felt an urge to record his experience that day. He had not written since the war, since the collapse of the world. Not even a letter for his mother. He would write about what he had felt and the future he had seen. They would again some day go above. He had felt that in the lightness of his heart that day.

He would write in his new language. His own language had quickly become a fleeting bird of his memory. He had not spoken it since the boat that had brought him here. He had been with fellow countrymen then, but then on arrival they had all been split up. There was only one language in this city and he liked that, it gave him a feeling of equality. He had studied hard to learn this new language and mastered it well. They said that his youth was an advantage, but he had already studied languages in school so it wasn't new to him. It was mostly a matter of practice and perseverance. Many of his coworkers were sons of laborers and didn't seem to have taken school seriously. He was from a well-educated, privileged family in his country, though money had very little to do with privilege there.

He realized that there would always be those who were superior in some way or another, but who was to say that superior was better? Yet, no matter where he had come from, he wanted to learn all there was to learn; it was a longing in him, greater than anything. He wanted to be there in that space of peace, where there only seemed to be him. The entire essence of him. In that space, there was no right or wrong, just light. A universal truth. He had not told any of his friends of that place. He was afraid of the consequences, of being misunderstood. It was his sanctuary. In the cigarette smoke and alcohol fumes surrounding his coworkers, there was no space for that part of living. He understood this instinctively.

Doru knew his way well in the dark passages, and he walked briskly. They called him a cat with those eyes of his. He was always in the front. Like a compass he pointed the way. It was as if the dark corridors and passages were more familiar to him than anywhere he had ever been. And even though he didn't like facing the darkness, he found a strange comfort in it. He walked quickly. It was late in the evening. Electricity was scarce. Even in public passages there was often very little light. They were working on finding better ways to make energy. Until then the city had to save on all natural resources. They were lucky to have any, the Ustodians said.

He thought about his mother, her silvery hair and dark, mysterious eyes. The light that surrounded her, when she entered a room. The scent of her skin, when she gave him hugs and kisses. His father had died during those few days the war had lasted. He had been visiting a power plant in Ukraine with his company. The place had been seriously damaged by the mushroom bombs, and his father had been poisoned to death. Her mother's eyes had been filled with grief, and in just a few days her black hair had turned gray. He never knew if his parents had been happy together. But after his father's death, it seemed whatever they had had was gone. His parents had worked hard and made life comfortable for him, their only son. And then in a matter of days it had all evaporated. His mother, now alone with the household expenses, had to take him out of school and Doru had to make new plans for his future. They had planned

for him to go to the university. Just before he left for America, his mother had given him a book with blank pages in it; requesting that he write her about his travelings. She had let him go so easily, standing there on the train platform waving goodbye, knowing that the chances of seeing him again were next to impossible. He wondered if it had really been easy for her to let go. First his father, then him.

He hadn't written or contacted her in any way, since the first weeks of his arrival to the city two years ago. Now, his mother tongue was fading, and he had forgotten about what other lives he could have led. He had no past in this world, and so he didn't worry about anything else. He simply carried on with the challenges he faced here. He had been brought up to be solitary by his parents, so nothing had really changed much. That night, however, he decided to write her, the woman who had breathed life into that body of his.

He lived in the lower eastern part of the city, where he shared a small apartment with Joe, a black man. Joe also worked for the Ustodians, renovating the city, expanding the Underground, building markets and connecting every major passage in midtown. Very few lived that far down, because a lot of areas hadn't been refurbished yet, so there were long stretches of walking passages with dim lighting or often blacked out. He had to walk through corridors that had been used by the people working on the trains before the war. There were no maps of these areas available, and it was like walking into a maze.

He closed his eyes for a moment like he used to do when he took a new passage and wanted to feel his way intuitively. That was his trick. If it hadn't been for his inner guide, he knew as little about finding his way in the dark as everybody else. Every time he went into the dark, he thought he was going to lose his way. The thrill of being able to find his way was rapturous, intoxicating. He opened his eyes again and walked along the narrow passageway, which smelled of urine and mold. One day, he would make a map of all these passages and hopefully make some sense out of them.

He turned another corner and heard a soft ringing. The passage unfolded like a fan into a wide corridor. He could faintly see a small group of people gathered in the other end. He moved along one wall to avoid being seen. He had a feeling that strangers weren't welcomed into this group. The ringing came from a small metal bell that a still standing person was swinging from side to side. The sound was insignificant, but after a while it penetrated his ears like a knife, going through to the core of him or what he imagined was the core. As he slowly approached the strange procession, he saw that people walked in small circle-like movements. He stayed close to the wall, out of sight. He was drawn to the small crowd. He wanted to be part of it. The bell rang for him too, but he kept out of sight, as another force in him made him stay alert. Outside the group was where he usually kept himself.

They had drawn with chalk on the concrete ground, but he couldn't make out what it represented until he followed people's feet. They were moving round and around, up and down. It was a labyrinth. He had never seen one in his life, but he knew about them from school. They were in the ancient myths. They had been used for rituals. The labyrinth represented the complexity of human nature, the human brain, or

the pathways taken by the individual. The people in the procession seemed to know where they were going, so he wondered whether they had become so familiar with the labyrinth that they didn't have to think of where they were going, or perhaps the labyrinth only had one path.

There were six of them, all dressed in orange robes. Four of them would always stand around the labyrinth forming a circle while the other two would walk the paths. The only sound they made were the ringing of the little bell. He felt the peaceful lightness within again like earlier that day. He was back under the sky again, this time watching the stars and the waning moon. He felt himself become part of the walking meditation, and was energized by it. Once a person entered the middle of the paths, he or she would sit down on the concrete, legs crossed and eyes shut. Doru stayed where he was, hidden from the intriguing gathering.

Some time had passed, when he heard the rumbling of a group of people entering the corridors. They were solid men, dressed in stale green uniforms. They carried nightsticks in their hands, ready to strike. They entered the corridor from where he had come. Luckily for him, he had found a notch, where he was hidden from either side. In the short time, it took the uniformed men to tear the procession apart and handcuff everybody, nobody noticed the young observer, who saw with terror how the unearthly peace had been broken in a matter of seconds. It was more violent to him than watching his drunken colleagues get into friendly fist fights with each other, leaving the sound of tight flesh against flesh and moans of agony to their sobering audience.

When everyone had left the scene, it was drably quiet in the corridor. The men in the green uniforms had tried to smear out some of the chalk, but he could still follow some of the lines of the figure. He ran his foot over it, listening to the scraping sound of his shoe. For a moment, he thought he heard the bell ringing again like a reverberation. He stood there in the dark passage, listening to the echoing sounds of the passages, while thinking that it had all been a dream. And as he began walking again, he soon forgot about the procession and only one thought lingered on his mind; the journal his mother had given him. He had come to a strange world, and somebody should keep a record of what went on in it.

That night when he finally fell asleep and his heart had settled for a calmer pace, he dreamt that he lost his way in the passages and couldn't find his way home. He kept running in circles, becoming more and more desperate, because they were waiting for him to guide the way.

'When are we there?' their voices echoed through the low ceilings.

"Help us!"

Eventually, he stopped running, and the voices calling out for him grew faint. As he lingered to look at himself in the mirror, he couldn't recognize his body any longer. It had become translucent and its form was slowly fading into nothing, not even a sliver of light.



### III. Where the Shadows Grow Long

#### *New York, 2042*

The West Fourth Market spread out like Christmas presents on a string, and went along the fourth street line ending at the train station, where lines A and F ran. Shops, newspaper stands, cafes, comp shops, bars and restaurants unfolded themselves to the eye, standing in either the east or west ends of the fourth street cross-tunnel. Unlike so many other parts of the world, everything was available here for the swipe of a valid ID-card; exotic traditional foods from Europe, Australia, India and Asia, shoes, clothes, electronics, magazines, juices, sweets, alcohol, and information. However, there was one flaw; quality products were hard to come about. The world had long ago been exhausted of its many resources, and it had showed even in the heart of this grand city, where most goods of the world eventually came to.

Sera walked down the cross-tunnel toward the trains, and let in the smells of falafel and cheese mixed with the smoke from the sweet almond roasting machines. Once she stopped to take a look at a dress, exhibited in a shop window. It looked ancient, a relic from a faraway past; a heavy, long, shiny drapery, falling in folds, a tight waist and long, puffed sleeves. It was either priceless or a copy, either way not realistic to her finances. She felt invited by its beauty, and it took a while before she walked on. The public loudspeakers with their usual instructions had been quiet for a while, but began again. She couldn't get used to their constant enervating presence, like the pressing veil of night that shrouded everything in the Underground.

“General announcements,” it reverberated from the loudspeakers. “Citizens, be aware that tonight we will turn off most electricity, except from special authorized work spaces at 23:00 instead of 24:00 hours. Due to a shortage plan most electricity will be turned off at 23:00 tonight. This message will be repeated every hour.

“To accommodate for our growing needs because of the huge influx of newcomers, we are working on expanding beyond the eastern boundaries of the city....

“Citizens, please watch out for a young man, six foot tall, dark, long hair, brown eyes and medium built. He is wearing a green jacket. It has come to our attention that he steals people's ID-cards. We ask of you not to panic. We have our men on the investigation and the man will soon be detained. This was the general announcements, now back to the local stations....”

As she entered the train station at the end of the markets, it occurred to her that there was nothing

anyone could do with somebody else's ID-cards. The security regulations made it impossible to use somebody else's card. Somebody had nothing better to do, or perhaps it didn't take a genius to break the security codes like they said.

"Train A going downtown will be arriving in five minutes on platform one," another metallic voice rang through the closed off platforms.

She swiped her ID-card at the turnstile machines and walked through to the platforms. The ten feet high shields, which rose at the very edge of the platform like white prison walls, protected her from the train tracks. The shielding walls were constructed so that doors, identical to those of the trains, opened in the wall when a train arrived. People waited mainly in the middle areas of the platform where benches, rubbish bins, food machines, and maps were placed. From the green marked spaces people boarded the trains, from the red they alighted.

People moved in slow, economical paces, as if they all fit into a puzzle; every piece had its respective, separate place, and never moved beyond its borderlines. Most of the people on the benches were bent over, resting their arms on their legs as if their faces and torsos were too heavy to carry upright. Some people leaned up against columns or walls, stretching their necks to better hear the trains; they wore their faces callously like masks.

There were no dogs or babies in this world, just faces that saw without seeing. There were no greens or flowers growing in gardens and along streets, just walls and lamps. There were no bicycle bells ringing or clatters of voices rising into the air, just the loudspeaker announcements vibrating back and forth off the walls and ceilings like echoes in a cave. There were no rays of sunlight coming in through cracks or windows, bringing a little warm light to the place. There were only endless street tunnels and railways stretching and winding like big fat snakes, sleeping in their domain, waiting to smell their prey and devour it. But they said this was now the safest place in the world to live, since the division of powers in the world had shifted and the weakest had taken the positions of the strongest. This was her great opportunity to make a career in one of the richest places in the world, the most efficient of them all in its technology and welfare of people. They said that no one ever went hungry to bed and everybody had work and security. But something was missing, which was as invisible as she. It was like a voice in her head, a fear in her body, making her want to run away, back under the southern skies where she came from, where there were no tunnels to feel lost in but a vast open landscapes. This city reminded her too much of places she would never dare to go again.

A tall, young man, loudly speaking to himself disturbed the silent crowd of uniforms and suits as he strolled down the platform. He wore an unlike lush green jacket, made of the same raw material as most, and his black and kinky hair revealed signs of far away descendants, which the pale yellow skin of his face concealed. He mumbled to himself, sometimes he hummed. Then for a brief moment it seemed he made some sense.

“In relation to their systems most systematizers are like a man who builds an enormous castle and lives in a shack close by; they do not live in their own enormous systematic buildings. But spiritually that is a decisive objection. Spiritually speaking a man’s thought must be the building in which he lives – otherwise everything is topsy-turvy,” he announced proudly.

No one seemed distracted by his unusual behavior; as if he didn't exist in this world, a mere fantasy mirroring a lost dimension. The faces of the crowd remained drowsy in contemplation. No smiles, no cries. The silence was like noise to her. It seemed, only this man knew of his own existence.

As suddenly as he had appeared, he was gone, as if he had never been. And a pregnant silence returned to the platform again. Sera moved uncomfortable in her position with her body rested up against the wall. When she stood for too long in one place, she would smell and taste the air, which often made her feel sick. It was beginning again. Today, it was a distinct smell and it came from the tracks, behind the shields where nothing was visible, where no one looked or walked, because there were just darkness and rails. There were no other places the smell could come from. The Underground was kept in the best of order and cleanliness by the Keepers, who were employed by the Ustodians. There was no dirt or mess. They were hired to do all the maintenance of the trains, the station areas, the tunnel streets, and the big market areas. They worked in pairs, large, solid men with quick, efficient moves. She had seen them with their nightsticks and carts.

The smell reminded her of the old attic in the large house where her grandparents, Ea and Mihai used to live, on the great hill in Truia. It had been stuffed with boxes, pictures, and interiors from the classrooms, where people came to study the arts of the old Eastern ways. Once, when she was eight years old, she had gone up to the attic on her own. Out of breath and her mouth dry, she studied the colorful carpets, things and many boxes with strange words written on them. It was all covered in a thick layer of dust, and when she ran her fingers over the surfaces, she could draw letters and images. Then a smell had caught her nostrils and she followed it to a big box, big enough to hold a full-grown man. She stood there for a long time, staring at the box, letting the aroma play with her imagination, satisfying her worst suspicions of her grandparents, who were not like other grown-ups. They didn't speak of the same things, or participated in the same activities as other grown-ups. They performed their own rituals behind closed doors.

First, she imagined it was a dead animal. Her grandparents were keen vegetarians, but she had heard stories of ritual sacrifices of animals. Perhaps they practiced that too. Her mind went back to the size of the box. Even though she had never seen the dead body of her father, she knew about death. It was loneliness and absence. It was waiting. It was waking in the early morning, hearing a familiar sound or seeing his beloved face and being told it was merely a trick of the mind. She stood in front of the box for a long time. Only when her mother called from below, she gained the courage to quickly slide the lid half way open and peeked in. To this day, she still couldn't separate the image in her mind from what she

actually saw. She knew the smell hadn't come from the box. But since that day, she never went back to the attic. Whatever was inside had her spooked. Sera and her mother slowly drifted away from the house and the grandparents' life. But that had been a long time ago. Ever since her teenage years, she had been curious to know more about her strange family. Different didn't mean better or worse.

The smell was inside her nostrils like a bug. Breathing was getting harder. She paced back and forth on the platform. Big machines hidden in the ceilings boosted air into the stations, the hallways and tunnels. They called them the respirators. The only signs of their presence were the small clicking sounds they made, like twigs snapping. She could hear when she focused in, let her head get all quiet from the noise within, and it was like picking up a wave on the radio.

She thought about the cool air along the beaches of her home place. She used to spend a lot of time on the beaches with her family, when she was little. Mia and Grandma Ea would always be discussing things, while she and her grandfather would walk hand in hand, looking at the wind playing with the waves and the sand. He never spoke much, but when he did, he spoke to her and she would listen to the strangely singsong way he spoke. The memory didn't help her. It felt like her lungs filled with smoke and not air as she inhaled the underground air, as if some bodily function in her didn't allow her to breathe all the way into her lungs. These sensations she had only had since she had come to this city. They said that the air in the Underground was cleaner than most places. She found this hard to believe, and yet more than half a million people lived and breathed in this strange city.

She walked all the way to the end of the platform where the trains first sounded behind the shields, coming out of the tunnel. At the end wall there was a crack just big enough for her head to go through. The smell was coming from the tracks, and it was fouler than she had first thought. Her eyes quickly adjusted to the dark on the other side. Light fell in streams through other cracks and holes in the shields. It seemed that the light insisted on penetrating the waiting darkness. Another light came from somewhere inside the tunnel. She looked at it with a mixture of dread and excitement. The attic wasn't so far away from her world after all. It seemed to be ever present. She pulled her head back. The smell seemed unbearably foul, but she only noticed when her head was out of the hole. She looked around at the people further down the platform. She was by herself. The distraction had helped her calm her breath again. She stuck her head back into the crack, driven by her curiosity. Some living creature, resembling a rat with a long hairless tail, almost as big as a cat, ran across the rails. She shivered, trying to see where it went. Then in a glimpse, lingering for a second, she thought she saw the silhouette of a person in the periphery of the tunnel.

She pulled her head back again and looked up into two blue eyes, directed stiffly at her. The eyes belonged to one of the Keepers. She recognized him by the stale green uniform and the crew cut hair. His square face looked sinister and inhuman. He looked at her with an angry expression on his face, scolding her for being a bad girl.

"Excuse me, Miss..., may I ask what you are doing?" the Keeper's dark voice vibrated.

They said that the Keepers were really robots, like the machines that controlled the trains. Sera's tongue stopped working. All she could do was to shrug her shoulders and give him one of her brief, pleasant smiles. For a long while they both remained quiet. One didn't mess with the Keepers. They had the right to carry guns and were authorized to keep order, using whatever means they needed.

Finally, he spoke again.

"I'll give you a warning for now, so I won't take down your name. But that area is dangerous, and we don't want to see a young lady like you hurt," he smirked and put emphasis on 'young lady'.

Sera nodded and looked down, as she quietly passed the Keeper. She walked back to the waiting area and found a seat, which she fell into exhaustedly, while catching her breath. She was breathing heavily as though she had just climbed a steep hill at home. After a while, she dared look up and the Keeper was nowhere to be seen.

"Train A going uptown will be arriving in two minutes and 30 seconds. Please stand in front of the green areas and stand clear of the red areas," a metallic voice announced through the loudspeakers.

People moved quickly; if they didn't, they would miss the train. The doors of the trains only opened and closed once. She found a green area, where she and eight other people were pressed up against the protective wall. It had taken her a long time to get used to the system and in the beginning she had missed a lot of trains. Here they didn't operate with conductors, only highly sensitive sensors. And machines didn't know what it was like to have a body.

She took a deep breath and moved with the crowd through the opening doors.

"Train A has arrived and will leave in 20 seconds. Stand clear of the closing doors," the voice announced again.

When safe indoor, she heard the protective shield door close, then the train doors and shortly after the train moved on the rails below. She sat down on one of the shiny white plastic seats, next to an elderly woman facing a row of male faces. She could only tell they were men, because of their beards and mustaches. Most city people, woman or man, wore the same short haircuts. One of the faces looked briefly back at her. Its harsh and bitter lines, wrinkles that could never be straightened out, resembled nothing human in her memory. She flinched as she thought of what strange creatures lived undisturbed there behind the walls. Perhaps there was a world of its own that no one knew of.

The entire interior of the trains was constructed in that same white, shiny plastic even the poles. A metallic voice along with the displays hanging from the ceilings went on announcing stops over the loudspeakers, and guiding people when to get off and on. The noises and lights from the displays made it almost impossible to read, so most of the train time was spent on dozing off, looking at faces or listening to the noises of the train-car as it rumbled over the rails. Her favorite thing was to stare into the spaces beyond the train windows, letting her imagination take her to other places.

In her new neighborhood in the northern outskirts of the city, she heard that there had once been a park on the Grounds, in which a building from the 12th century had been reconstructed. In the 19th century, a wealthy man had imported whole buildings from France and Belgium and brick for brick, a medieval monastery-like building had been reconstructed. After the Final War, it had been deserted like all other areas of the Grounds, closed for the public. No one knew what was left of it.

< In the ruins, some of the cloisters still stand undisturbed among pillars and bricks, and in the little yard, there is a marble fountain where a small angel boy used to pour water from his urn >

From the voice in her mind, which seemed to be her thoughts, she could almost see the place as if she had been there. She just had to close her eyes and something inside guided her to create a picture behind her eyelids, like she created images of Copenhagen, where her grandparents had lived, when her mother was a child, before they immigrated to Aotearoa. Even though she only had a few memories of them from when she was a kid, it was as though they were always close in her thoughts, popping up like bursts of sunlight, comforting her, when she was sad and laughing with her, when she was happy. Unlike so many other people she had met, they didn't seem to fade away with time. They were always near, always living. One day she hoped she could be near them again, and talk to Grandma Ea.

She looked up at one of the men that were seated opposite her. A new face. He had been staring at her for some time. She could feel his eyes directed to her. He had short black hair and dark eyes. His face was covered with a skin rash, but the shade of his skin wasn't pale like most. He had to be a newly arrived like her, which explained why he dared look at her so bluntly. He didn't know about the Keepers, the Underground safety net of rules. One of them was the harassment act, which protected women in public places. Men simply weren't allowed to approach women in any way that suggested sexual implications. It was easy for a woman to condemn a man these days. For hundreds of years, women had had to go through difficult processes to prove their rights. They had finally been liberated in the sense that the Western law systems had verified the sexual differences between men and women, anatomically, psychologically and socially, and therefore the two parties couldn't be treated on the same grounds in a court case or anywhere else. The respect of the sexes was a highly sensitive issue and much time and money were spent on these matters.

He smiled showing a set of askew, discolored teeth. She thought she could sense his thoughts. They were about her, how he desired her. She looked away. She wanted him to keep his sticky eyes to himself. She could feel anger inside like a bee trapped inside a glass. It had been there for many years, and some times it would surface, but she couldn't let it go. She kept the bee trapped; only the buzzing reminded her of its existence. Like most of her feelings, it eventually subsided when he got off a few stops later. She almost immediately forgot about his eyes, and drifted into cloudy daydreams where she thought she could

hear a soothing voice.

o o o o o o o

In the other end of the A-train, a tall, slim man with long dark, thick hair gathered in a pony-tail, had just found an available seat. Doru sat down and closed his eyes, concentrating on within, behind his eyelids where there was peace. He sat there for a long while, without moving a muscle or his breath. It was the kind of peace, which prevails in a secret garden. He found this garden so easily now. He had practiced for many years.

An elderly lady sat next to him and followed him closely for a while. Then, after some time of looking at the silent man with his eyes closed, she got up to take another seat further down. From here she could still keep a stern eye on the younger man; as if she thought he would vanish into air, and she wouldn't want to miss that when it happened. Nobody else in the car seemed to have the same kind of interest in the man. And for a long time nothing happened, no one entered or left. Like in his secret garden, a profound peace encompassed the train-car, where even the loudspeaker had ceased its perpetual calls.

When Doru opened his eyes, coming to the third last stop, the lady had already stepped off. He still had the sense of having been watched and looked around to find that the car was almost empty. Then he remembered the dream he had waken up with that morning; that same feeling of being watched. He had been sitting on the ground meditating. His eyes were closed, but he could still see. In front of him, there was an empty bench with its back toward him. A small boy climbed up on it and stared at him. The boy had grayish blue eyes and a small nose and lips like little children have. He fidgeted a lot on the bench. Doru had sat there with his back against the bench, repeating his mantra over and over, while listening to its effects. Then an elderly woman came by and sat down on the bench. He knew that she watched him too. It wasn't with eyes of curiosity like the little child, but she looked at him with acknowledgment. And there was no doubt in his mind that he was accepted. It had felt good to wake up from the dream. He held the sense of the dream in his mind and heard again the sound of the mantra and his astral initiation.

“190”, the voice announced as the doors opened.

He stepped out on the platform and waited for the train to leave, until he started walking toward the exit. Further up the platform he could see a small crowd of people moving, among them a young lady that he had not seen before. He noticed her long hair, which was a rarity. Most women wore their hair short, like they wore the same kind of bland work clothes as men. To his disfavor their appearances were now so similar that it was hard to distinguish men from women. The ludicrous reason for this was that it was more hygienic and it minimized discrimination and distractions on the job. It was now a legal matter under the new discrimination law.

*Only bad excuses for keeping people on a short leash. Differences are our blessing. We can go beyond many*

*barriers if we focus on life's versatility and different voices*, he thought. He imagined it was anger and fear of the feminine forces that created these charades.

He smiled to himself. *Maybe it'll all change soon*, he thought.

He decided to take the other way home and went past the exit doors. He went to the end of the platform where a sign said 'keep out - danger'. There was a small exit with an old, iron sliding door. On the side of the door, there was a crack in the old rusty iron, which he could just slip through. He walked through the ruin-like state of the old exit, which the Keepers had left unattended by their cleaning gear and nightsticks, as if they feared the long, deserted, and dark corridors of the thinly populated neighborhood. He had only lived in Inwood for six years, but in all that time, no renovation had been done to the area. Since the Ustodians took over the city completely, there wasn't the same sense of working together to make the town a brighter, safer place. The money and energy went somewhere else.

o o o o o o o

Sera walked down the long tunnel leading to her building. The lighting was dim and the air stuffy. She felt short of breath again and had to slow down for a while, even though she only wished to get out of the tunnels as fast as possible. The damp darkness was pressing on her aching forehead. Inwood wasn't a big neighborhood, but the Underground tunnels always seemed to go on forever. In the darkness everything expanded and like in the depths of an ocean, she could only go so far before she would be lost for the world above forever. There was only one major market square in that part of the Underground, the rest of it were tunnels leading to residential entrances and closed-down exits to the Grounds. She had never seen any of the Keepers in Inwood, and she wasn't sure if that was a good sign. Luckily, her building was only eight minutes' walk from the trains. She followed the illuminated signs of the house numbers that were put up everywhere. Everything was numbers in this world, she realized.

She walked quickly down two smaller, deserted street tunnels, where she had never seen anyone else apart from Selma, her roommate. The place gave her chills down the neck, and she always hurried through the last two tunnels, even when she could hardly breathe. Sometimes, she wondered what would happen if she took the wrong turns. Where would the pathways lead? Did they go deeper or were there places, which nobody knew of, forgotten about since the war?

Finally, she came to the exit of her building and climbed the stairs to the reception where a security person used to sit, taking notice of who went in and out. The table and chair was still there, but empty and worn out. They had put up a metal shining teller instead, like the ones they used for the trains, which were hooked up to an alarm and surveillance system. She put her ID-card through the slit, which immediately displayed her number and name, and the date and time.

After a click a metallic voice said: "Welcome home, Miss Sera Skau."

She walked through the teller and further into the building. They had fixed up the front part, but further into the house, the paint was peeling off, stairs creaked, and holes and cracks showed here and there. It seemed as though the rest of the house had been forgotten. She waited for the elevator with unease, dreading the stairs, which, half of the time were hidden in darkness, because the lighting never worked properly. The walls and ceilings of the elevator looked like they were about to crumble and the lamenting sounds of the machinery seemed to be on the verge of breakdown. When Selma was there she always felt much safer. Selma would always reassure her of the safety rules in a confident manner that would diminish her fear.

“Anybody home?” Sera yelled, entering the front door, which caused another click. The apartment smelled of freshly brewed homemade coffee.

“I am in here. Did you have a nice day?” Selma asked, as Sera stopped in front of the door to Selma’s room.

Selma didn’t look up; she was sitting on her bed, books and photocopies spread all over the sheets and on the floor. She looked tired, her mascara smeared out under her eyes and her skin pale, without the usual layer of make-up. She was still wearing her night t-shirt, a long white shirt that had a teddy bear on the front and said ‘I love you’. Frank had given it to her when they had first met. Selma usually never wore it in public, not even when Sera was around. Selma said it was silly, but practical at night.

“Yes. I didn’t see you at school. What have you been up to?” Sera asked.

“I found this interesting article on child psychology. They are studying ways to develop the young brain’s activity. By the time, the child reaches maturity, it will be a genius using over 5% more of its brain. It is very interesting. Well, and I wanted to read more, so... and the thing is I really need to study a lot more. I don’t have time for going to classes. I have been neglecting the counseling part too. And soon we will have to do the recording. I’m so not prepared, Sera.”

“Selma, it isn’t for another six weeks. Relax.”

Selma looked at Sera with despair.

“I’m sure, you’ll do fine as long as you don’t stress yourself. You always do much better than you think,” Sera added.

“Don’t say that. This is harder. I don’t like the camera, and we have to go through all the different theories this time.”

“But it is more coherent and practical, because we get to use what we have studied in practice,” Sera said and looked perplexed at Selma, who got up from her seat.

“Positive, right?” Selma said with an ironic tone of voice and started picking up her clothes. Then she walked over to Sera to close the door. She always preferred to dress in private.

“Are you home for dinner?” Sera asked, as Selma closed the door.

“Yes”, she answered behind the closed door. “Maybe we could go out for dinner?”

Union Square Market was crowded for a Tuesday night. They slipped through the turnstiles and turned south onto the old Broadway system. In building 2000, they had just opened a new Italian restaurant, Selma had said. She loved pasta and tomato sauces. Sera ate most things as long as it wasn't from a machine. That food always made her sick. The street tunnels here were lit up better, and Sera felt more comfortable especially with Selma at her side. Sera felt like taking her hand or arm in hers, but knew that Selma wouldn't like that too much.

"Have you ever wondered what would happen if suddenly one day you took the wrong turn and got lost in the Underground?" Sera suddenly asked, remembering her walk through the Underground in Inwood.

"That wouldn't happen. It is so well signed and all, this system," Selma replied.

"But what if it did happen, hypothetically. The mere thought gives me the creeps."

Selma stopped walking and looked sharply at Sera as if to find a deeper meaning with her question.

"I have lived here for more than ten years now, you have to trust me on this one. Things like that never happen. New York is one of the safest places in the world. The Keepers are here to take care of us and everywhere you will find maps and emergency phones," Selma said and put her finger on Sera's shoulder, still looking at her.

"I think maybe you lack some excitement in your life, young lady," she said and laughed, the sound of her laughter rumbling slightly under the low oval ceilings.

Sera looked at the menu and tried to make up her mind. They didn't serve meat dishes. She didn't particularly fancy meat, but it was still such a novelty to her compared to home, where they still had a huge market for meat. Here most people had turned vegetarians, not from conviction but rather out of need. The years of pollution had destroyed many things in the US including the soil and crops. Farming had become minimal, and there simply wasn't enough to go around for a lot of animals too. Crops were now grown in huge 'bubble' towns where the sun's rays could reach without having a damaging effect and the air was filtered before reaching the crops.

"I'll have the pasta with tomato and basil sauce," announced Selma with a smile, "I'm starving, I've only had some pieces of bread all day."

"You've been home all day. The fridge is full," Sera looked worried at her friend.

"Don't, okay. I am fine. I worked all day," Selma said defensively, moving her gaze away from the table.

The waiter moved through the small restaurant over to their table. He had dark eyes and hair. Sera smiled first to the waiter then to Selma who looked uninterested.

"What can I help you ladies with tonight?"

“Two pasta with tomato and basil sauce, please. And two glasses of water, thank you,” Sera replied patiently.

The waiter wrote down the orders and smiled to Sera again.

“Can I suggest to you our special salad of the week with your pasta...?”

“No, thank you,” Selma said impatiently and looked over at Sera.

The waiter bowed slightly and left the table.

“What is wrong with you, Selma? I guess you never did get out of bed.”

“Oh, don’t you see it? He is chatting you up!”

“So what! I thought you said I needed some excitement in my life!” Sera said and smiled. Surprised by her sudden outburst.

“You don’t understand men. That isn’t the kind of excitement you are looking for. Men are no good, not even for the sexual part. You are lucky that you aren’t involved in relationships...”

“What is wrong?” Sera asked as quietly as possible and moved her chair closer to Selma’s.

Selma gave Sera a resigned smile.

“Frank and I broke up I think...I mean he said that he needed a break. I mean we hardly see each other anyway.”

“But isn’t that good? Didn’t you want this?” Sera asked cautiously.

“Yes, so I did...I guess. I don’t know. I don’t know if I can, if I want to...”

“I’m sorry, Selma,” Sera said quietly.

“So am I.”

When they had finished their meal, being out of good ideas, they walked further south to the Junk market to check out if they could find anything for their apartment, a piece of furniture or some kitchenware. The evening was pretty quiet. The market square, illuminated by big projectors hanging from the ceilings and air-conditioned by two huge machines, was only half full and they could easily make their way from stand to stand. In one corner of the market, some fleshy guy was selling 20th century cameras using film negatives. Sera walked over to the stand, while Selma was looking at handkerchiefs and essential oils. The salesman was selling camera parts, like lenses, stands, motors and whole, old secondhand cameras, Nikon, Canon, and Minolta. Sera looked with interest and touched the old pieces, from another time all together.

*Everything has to have changed so much*, she thought to herself, and noticed the salesman staring at her with a big smile on his lips.

“Can I help you with anything, Ma’am?” he asked still looking directly at her. He had a slightly slow Southern dialect.

“Where did you get all these pieces from?” Sera asked and looked at the table again. She had found a motor that would fit her old Nikon camera.

“Nice English, Ma’am. From another part of the world, I gather.” Sera nodded while she examined the motor.

“Well, I’m a collector. I find my goods round the place. That one costs \$400 for you, Ma’am,” he smiled again and held the little mechanism up in the light. Sera was beginning to lose her patience, but stayed.

“It's in an excellent condition,” he assured her.

“Where do you shoot your pictures? The light around here is very poor?” he asked.

“I know, my flash is never efficient enough, but I use my stand a lot. It takes ages to shoot a picture, but it's worth it.”

“What is your name?” he asked and smiled again, his dark eyes glittering in the projector lights.

“Sera,” she answered in a low voice, “I got to go now.”

“We could shoot some pictures together. I know places that are very interesting, Sera...”

“No thanks,” Sera mumbled and turned in one motion around, walking slowly while trying to catch a glimpse of Selma.

When she found Selma her cheeks were still flushed, but luckily Selma didn’t notice and didn't ask where she had been. She was busy finding a nice scent to buy with her new handkerchief.

o o o o o o

Doru stared at the descending sun, focusing on the violet colors. Just last year, he had removed the protective curtains, made of solid plastic, and had left the windows exposed and open to the world. The rays of the evening sun soothed and rejuvenated his eyes, gave them relief from always being in the dark or artificial illumination.

Most of his life had been hidden from the light and the warmth of the rays. Since he had removed the curtains, for the first time in many years he really lost himself in its alluring, unearthly face. As a kid, he had grown up as one of the privileged in a country rich on mountains, foothills, rivers, forests, volcanic springs and lakes, among a generous and openhearted people. It was a resourceful world in many ways; they never had to lack anything, but they did and had throughout history. He had seen the material poverty and repression, which had stayed with his country since early times, through dictatorships and wars, exploitation of women and people of lesser means. He saw it seep through the walls of the houses and buildings in the streets, and it smelled of dust and damage. It kept people from moving out of their place, and often added to their tendency of high temperament and unreliability. He suspected it was the lack of shrewdness and common sense, which had laid the country waste, stuck in a certain structure and mind set. It proved that it’d take more than compassion and heart to rule a world.

He had been sent off to a good boarding school early on by his parents, and most of his time was

spent indoors behind walls, in front of computer screens, laboratory instruments and apparatus. He had had the skills to become anything he wanted to be within the fields of the sciences and that despite the unsolicited warnings he had received for his many night excursions to the labs experimenting with explosive fusions and entering highly classified places in the computer webs. His accomplice was his classmate Christian and they spent the best times together. The one other thing that completed his life was those special Sundays, when the family came to visit him. His mother would show up at the doorsteps of the grand school building with the gray stones and pillars, her face lit up, her big skirt bulging with happiness. He only saw her and the light that seemed to surround her all the time. Those Sunday afternoons were never gray. He only remembered the light. And those were the most profound memories of the sun; it came and went with his mother. The lady who dressed in elegant clothes and smelled of French perfume and gave big, warm hugs, which reminded him of a home he rarely saw.

The sun disappeared ever so gently and he felt the peace and inspiration of the night, luring him into playfulness. He missed the childhood excursions. The adventures, the explorations, the first discoveries of something so precious and fantastic as being able to change the state of things, the equilibrium. He closed his eyes and moved his focus from the rays to behind his eyelids, feeling his way through his chakras. His meditation went further into a state of peace and gentle sounds. It stayed there for a long time...

*The corridors are damp and smell of the breath of death, but the darkness is comforting and I drift like a boat down the river steering toward an exit out of here.*

*I feel every thrust of my feet touching the hard, barren ground. I'm walking but not on my own. Someone I know very well is taking me into the corridors. She is balance, and, like a spider, she binds the web of life together, evening out every detail and touch. She has seen the future, she says with a hundred different voices that echo through my head. Her face is glowing white as if she was the sun of the Underworld and between her eyebrows, an indigo eye is staring at me, looking through me. Then she smiles to me, more confident, and whispers like the hissing of a snake. I can't understand what she says, but I know she has come to bring me something, an answer to the many unanswered questions of the world. Before she goes away, I see the serpents around her arms and I feel the sweetness of her breath, and I know she has come to bring life this time.*

Her eyes were open and shone a little in the faint stair lighting. Soledad was carrying a shoulder bag and her black, thick hair was ruffled and let loose.

"Hi, Doru," she said and smiled.

"Soledad, come in and let me give you a big hug. I haven't seen you for a long time," he said and felt excited and warm. He had missed her strange, deep kisses.

She stepped in and put her shoulder bag in the corridor and gave him a big hug. They stood there for a while, embracing and sensing each other. She smelled of myrrh and lavender. He sensed that she was stressed and that she had something to tell him. They let go and looked at each other.

“You've been meditating a lot, Doru. I feel a calm strength in your heart,” she said and touched the center of his chest lightly, tickling the inside of him.

“Yes, I have dedicated my time to teaching and my own practice. How are you doing with the MOSA group? How is your assignment going?”

Soledad gave out a tiny sigh, like a little gasp for breath.

“Can I sit down?” she asked.

“Yes, of course.”

They walked into his small living room, which he used for most activities. His bedroom he only used for sleep. Some nights, when he meditated or did his reading or did work for the group, he hardly slept more than two or three hours.

“Can I stay with you tonight? I need to be with you, Doru,” she asked as she fell into his couch. “I need to get away from the jumble for a while.”

He studied her face for some time.

“If it's not okay, I'll leave before midnight. I know you may have other things to do,” she looked pleading.

“Everything has its time. You can stay. I'll make us some tea. We have a lot of catching up. It feels like I've been away from everybody for so long. You must tell me all about what has happened.”

Soledad nodded and closed her eyes, breathing in the air in Doru's apartment, which smelled like leaves in the trees and sunlight on skin.