

Part 3

"You have to be alone and . . . seek a point, a virgin point within your being which has never been traveled before. . . . A point comes when you are left outside. Something enters...but not you. The I is left out at the door. You enter as energy, nameless, formless, but not as you have known yourself. Your whole identity is lost. ... You enter only when you don't know who you are. Then suddenly you are inside the shrine and you know who you are."

Jeremiah Jeff Love

VII. Women Warriors

There were no pictures hanging on the walls in room B21, just walls obscured by shelves, which were filled with binders, rolls of paper, books and files. Room B21 was located in the dusty and stale lower basement of the 38 story high former UN building that had been taken over by the Ustodians in 2021 shortly after the outbreak of the Final War. What used to have been filled with diplomats, ministers, journalists, and activists from all over the world, had now turned into the headquarters of the Ustodians. In room B21 everybody went to have copies made of their documents and out-of-date cases filed. There was always a constant stream of people coming through this room, which made it an excellent, but also challenging place for Soledad to do her energy work.

The lunch hour had left the copy room empty and deserted. Now was the only peaceful moment of the day, and if a window could have been opened, the cool air would have revived the place. The stuffiness in the room, caused by the three old giant copiers, was crushing in the afternoon, despite the many air ventilators. A long time ago, these copy machines had been surpassed by more advanced technology, but nevertheless, they had remained in the custody of the Ustodians, like a piece of valuable, antique furniture. Like locomotives, they chugged and puffed all day. Now they lingered in silence for a while, until she would press their buttons again, requiring their loyal assistance.

She sat down on the only chair in the room at the big table, where she sorted out the in-coming mail and packed the out-going mail. This was the best part of the building to begin with. Every employee would come here, even the Ustodians from time to time.

So-hum, she sang in her mind. *So-hum. Fill the world with light, a light of the heart.* She put her hand in the pocket and took out a small candle, which she could hide in a closed fist. *So-hum. So-hum. Heavenly mother take the fruits of our daily work, make them sacred, and bring us light to see. So-hum. So-hum.*

She lit the candle and looked at the blue and white flame. Her eyes felt soft and she stared into the third element, as if she would find the answers in there, between the heat and the air. *So-hum. So-hum.* She moved into the flame, felt its warmth and its colors until she was the flame; silent and still, ceaselessly moving her way through the wax, vibrating slightly, creator of energy and light. On this level of meditation, she found she had endless amounts of energy; she was connected to the Universe that filled her with its creative powers. *So-hum. So-hum*, she whispered and the wick trembled under her. *Heavenly mother bring us light, bring us light to see in the darkness.*

*Asato ma sad gamaya
Tamaso ma jyotir gamaya
Mrtyor ma amrtam gamaya
Om, Shantih, Shantih, Shantih*

“Soledad, good you’re here! I need fifteen sets of this document and a file entry and a printout of everything that concerns this case number. The case number is at the top right corner,” Mrs. Robinson dictated with a sharp voice and slammed the papers on the table, smirking a little.

Soledad looked up, waking slowly from her meditation.

“You’re not sleeping, are you girl? This is urgent,” Mrs. Robinson smiled again, amused by the situation.

“No, Ma’am,” Soledad answered promptly.

“Good. I realize this is your break, but it is rather urgent,” Mrs. Robinson was a short, small woman with short, curly hair, black pants and a small, blue jacket. Her shoes had high heels and made little keens, echoing blows as they touched the smooth, clean floors, one after another.

When she had just arrived to the big city, from the sand, seawater and deserted highways of Florida, she had been desperate to find a job to make a living. She had spent all of her savings on her first airfare. The flight had made her very sick. She didn't have the traveling for things like that, but her determination hadn't failed her. Her determination was bigger than her fear. The first job she found was at a small Italian restaurant where the owner of the place Ricardo, an Argentine man with big hairy arms, a dark moustache and big soft eyes, liked to boss his girls around. On nights, when he was absent, it was quite an amusing job to have. There was always a light atmosphere and people came not only for the food, but also the company of the waitresses. On some nights without the boss, it was the boss' girlfriend, a tiny lady with an irascible, fiery voice, who would spoil the fun. As time had gone by, she had found other jobs, where she could go about her own business, without feeling watched or judged. Ever since George had given her this assignment, she felt the old pressure coming back. And this time, she would really be in the spotlight, if she weren't careful. She was no longer working to merely make a living.

She gave out a sigh of relief. The small flame of the candle had died, when Mrs. Robinson had arrived and hadn't drawn any attention to itself. The document on the table had the stamp of ‘confidential’, and it aroused her curiosity. For a moment, she felt tempted to turn the pages and skim through them, but that was not why she was sent here. Poking around wasn't on her agenda, it involved too many risks. Her mission was to spread heartfelt light in whatever fashion it came to her.

So-hum, she hummed in her head and read the title before she put the pages into the slot of the machine, which began working with a gasping and groaning, a dragon awakened in its cave. “Analysis of the Yearly Measurements - Research and Targets”, it said. The machine swallowed the pages one by one

and spit them out into sets. She stared at the papers. It would have been so easy to take an extra copy and smuggle it out, but the minute she broke the rules, she wouldn't be safe anymore. She would be playing a different game. She would create impurities in her own energy and eventually endanger herself and the assignment George had given her. The Ustodians' security system was efficient and they would find her. As 'a newly arrived employee' she was especially exposed. She wasn't here to take, she was here to give.

"You are an example of the light of heaven. You are here to make people remember their true origin and awaken their higher consciousness," George had said.

Her hands were shaking and she tried to calm herself down by working on her breath. With the machine still working, she sat down again for a moment. The candle was still sitting on the empty table like a small boat lost at sea. She thought of the greenness of trees surrounding her and the blueness of the sky above her. Breathe. She had been preparing for this for so many years, and her practice had opened so many doors, given her abilities and experiences she could only dream of before. *Can I really do this? It will take some major work to change the energy structure*, she thought and went back to the dying growls.

In the late afternoon, Soledad was instructed to deliver a package to someone working in the other end of the long and tall part of the headquarters. There was no name on the package only the number of the room. The load of the package poked into her arm where she had put it and made her wonder what it contained. It was solid and compact like rock. She had to change position many times, in order to even out the weight. She walked toward the end of the headquarters where the old park and the visitor's entrance were. She was not familiar with this part. They usually didn't use her as a messenger. This was new. She had to pass through the long, empty level 0 corridors of the headquarters. Occasionally, another person would pass her by, but at the most she walked on her own, with the sound of her shoes hitting the parquet floors. Walking with the big package reminded her of Mr. Elsmore.

She had only been fifteen when she started working for Mr. Elsmore. She would run errands for him, mostly go to the post office, pick up packages for him or go to the nearest supermarket to get his groceries. He had a studio down on Los Olas Boulevard near the harbor in a ramshackle building. She remembered climbing those creaky stairs, anticipating every minute that she would fall through. His studio always smelled of paint and incense, a smell that became very familiar. Mr. Elsmore wore bandannas on his sunburned, balding head and glasses when he had to read the letters she brought him. He laughed a lot and told jokes about people on the streets. Some times, the jokes were about himself. He would ask her to write down his letters for him some times, and after a couple of months working for him, she had taken over most of the chores in the house on her weekly work day.

All the time she worked for him, he never personally showed her any of his paintings, but the few that hang on the walls of the studio. She would look at them when she had a spare moment, and he wasn't around. They mostly portrayed naked women, one very different to the other; some were fat, skin hanging

down in folds like curtains, some were skinny with sharp or soft hips sticking out, some were round, soft curves, some opened themselves like a flower, others held their hands over their breasts, some sat down, closed up like a flower bud. But in all of the portraits she found beauty, something, which made her linger and wonder. She had only herself started to get the shapes of a woman, and was curious to what it meant to have that kind of body and why a man would make so many paintings of them.

Mr. Elsmore, she came to discover, admired and worshipped women. Even in his late sixties and with his shabby looks and bad health, he would still stop up to look at a woman in the street. She saw that that when they went shopping together. Soledad often thought how strangely sweet a man he was, but not in the usual sense, as she would of a date. He wasn't the kind of man a girl like her would date. He could have been her grandfather. She used to hang out with a crowd among the Latinos then. Mr. Elsmore was white, from the Old Cracker society, which nobody knew anything about anymore. They used to own Florida centuries ago, now newcomers and other parts of the population were forming the upper class.

Nonetheless, when a year had gone by and Soledad was entering womanhood, Mr. Elsmore needed her twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays after school. On Mondays she ran errands for him, on Thursdays she modeled for him. In the beginning she wore clothes, but soon he asked her to drop all of it, and she did reluctantly at first. He had to agree to show her the paintings before she agreed. She liked the idea of being caught on paper, immortalized. An imprint of her remained on those canvasses. She became his personal sculpture, turning and twisting her body motionlessly to create new folds and curves for him to draw on those Thursday afternoons. Even though she would wake up on those Friday mornings with stiff muscles and a sore back from all of the long standing and difficult positions he put her in, she grew to enjoy the company and the money. It was liberating to be caressed by eyes and brush only. She had become a vehicle of beauty, instead of an object of desire.

One day, he asked her over on a Friday night. They had dinner and went to the movies. After that she spent more and more time with him. He told her all about the art of drawing a woman. Woman embodied that hidden part of himself and the world, in which everything was created, broken down and restored. Woman inspired him to live. But since the day he gave her roses, tried to kiss her, and proposed to her, she had run away from his studio, never to return. She had liked posing for him, when he was looking and admiring her from a distance like a fatherly figure, supportive and protective of her womanhood. She didn't want to know him any other way.

She finally found the room and with Mr. Elsmore still in her thoughts, she knocked on the door, one hand and arm holding the package. Years after, she had tried to track him down, but with no luck. She had never met any of his friends. Their relationship had always been between the two of them in his studio on Los Olas. Nobody had known about them, except from the man in the supermarket and the woman at the ticket office at the movie-theater. She remembered people talking about him, saying that he had gone to Hawaii that very year, when she had run away from him with her arms full of his beautiful roses.

Nobody had ever given her flowers before; so even if it lasted for a brief moment until she had to trash them before she saw her parents, she had treasured them. It had all been like a dream.

She could hear someone rummaging on the other side of the door. She knocked again. The name sign on the door read "Mr. Albert Byrne".

"Leave it on the doorstep," a voice said from behind the door.

She felt eyes watching her from somewhere, but couldn't find the source. She dropped the heavy box, disappointed that she didn't get to see the person or the contents of the package. Life always seemed full of missing pieces. Some of them she would even keep from herself, though she knew them all along. Mr. Elmore had such a kind face, round, mild lines and his joking manners would always light her up even on the gloomiest of days, when the world overwhelmed her. She had loved him, as one of the first, she realized. And they had never touched in the physical way.

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George was waiting for her in front of the coffee bar, where they had been a week ago. He looked like a statue, back erect and face calm and still, and if Sera touched him his skin would feel cold and smooth like marble. She noticed that people were looking at him as they passed by with eyes on stalks; a woman sitting at one of the cafe tables, her hands wrapped around a coffee cup, had her eyes fixed on him in a trance-like way. He had no particular attractive features; a short, middle aged, skinny man, his hair graying and his face long and bony. He was wearing a pair of glasses, which she hadn't noticed before. Then he saw her and lifted his hand to greet her, she lingered caught by a crowd of people moving past her.

"Hi, my love," he said, took her hands, and smiled to her, as if they had always been dear friends.

"How are you doing? And your foot?"

She felt like crying and she suspected he knew, so she looked away from his warm gaze.

"Good," she finally said and nodded.

There was something in his words or voice or hands, which made her long for a home, some place where she was always welcome.

"I want to show you a place today, where you can always go, if you need to get away from the hustle and bustle," he said and looked at her for a moment. Then he started walking.

She followed him with slow steps. They walked on with the moving crowd of people along the many market shops where an assortment of magazines, clothes, food and snacks was sold.

"All of this wasn't here before they expanded the train station," George said and walked on, past the tunnel to the train, further west. After some walking in an area with fewer people and shops, he made a sharp turn through a small corridor opening, off the main street tunnels.

"The subterranean world of New York is much more than shopping areas, markets, trains and tracks,

it is layers upon layers, a honeycombed network of tunnels, tubes, crevasses, endless cavities and burrows, you name it. It's all interconnected curiously enough like we are to each other and the Universe. Of course, we can't see this, unless we learn to open our hearts completely."

The corridor was dark, and she couldn't see where they were walking. She followed his voice, stepping carefully on the rocky ground. It was as though the darkness had swallowed the noise and turmoil of the West Fourth Market and protected them from any harm. They turned and just as she had become used to the somberness, a dim light filled the next corridor.

"We rarely have lights in the corridors that connect to the open spaces. Most people tend to stay away from the dark areas, so the ones who need to find us can. We don't want to shut ourselves or them totally out."

George's voice was firm and stable as if he was standing next to her and not walking in front of her. The corridors became wider and were filled with more light from bulbs hanging from the damp, dripping ceilings.

"We get electricity and water from the lines and pipes that go through this area. It used to be a meeting place for the track maintenance crews, but became deserted many years ago, since they changed the train system and minimized the work force."

George stopped. They had come to a big, black door. The paint had faded and across the door, very faintly in big white types, it said 'Employees Only'.

"This is where we have our center," George said.

Again she wondered who the 'we' were.

They stepped into another corridor. There were doors on both sides and a flight of stairs led up to another level.

"The bathroom and kitchen are down here, but let's go upstairs first that's to the common areas and classrooms."

The stairs led up to an identical corridor with the same kind of doors. George opened one of the doors and she looked into a cement-walled cubicle. It was a classroom. On the floor was a big Persian looking rug, and small pictures of faces and people sitting in cross-legged positions hung on the walls. In a corner there was a CD player and an altar table with candles and incense on it. There were no tables or chairs like in a regular classroom, so she wondered why he called it that. She remembered Ea and Mihai's rooms in their old house in Auckland, where they used to have people coming in and out of. Often there would be visitors speaking strange languages and wearing different clothes. Her grandparents had taught yogic positions, meditations and their mystical ways in those rooms.

The next room had chairs and a big table. There were books on shelves and light came from a shaft in one corner of the room. Two men were reading in the room, they looked up and smiled when George and Sera entered.

“Hi, George, you’re back,” said a tall, thin man, with a long, clean shaven face and small, friendly eyes behind a pair of glasses.

“Yes, I brought along a friend, Sera,” George said. “This is Will and Michael. They take care of the place when I am not around.”

The two men got up and shook hands with Sera. The other man, Will, a short, firmly built man with blond hair gave her a strong handshake.

“The center is a little quiet now, but normally there are more people coming in and out. There’s a class going on right now actually,” Michael said. “Where are you from?”

“I’m from Aotearoa,” she answered, puzzled how he could know she was a stranger since she hadn’t uttered a word.

“I sensed that you weren’t from these parts. You’ve come a long way! You have to tell me about that place some day,” Michael said.

She nodded.

“Are you interested in the spiritual ways?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered and felt a little uncomfortable about his directness. Michael and George kept quiet while they looked at her and smiled.

“Well, if you have any questions, I’ll be happy to try and answer,” Will said and looked at George and Michael. They all nodded.

“Yes, I’m sure we all can help you in some way. I’ll give you a map so that you can find us again,” George said and smiled.

“Maybe you’ll join one of our classes?” Michael asked.

Sera shrugged her shoulders. She didn’t know what to say, but felt obligated to give them a positive response.

“This is where you can find me, I spend most of my time here,” George said. He had taken her to another room that had more shelves full of books and papers. There were a big heavy desk, a couple of chairs and in the back pictures on the walls and a big mattress with sheets and a light blanket.

“Even though I am here, I might be occupied. I have a different schedule than most people and I can’t come right away“.

“So you live here?” she asked.

“I find that it’s better like this. Then I’m always here when I’m required. And I’m at the core of everybody’s focus.”

She looked more closely at one of the walls. What had caught her attention was a picture of a window looking out onto a city of skyscrapers and bridges crossing water. The square, sharp lines of the buildings accompanied the horizontal lines of the bridges and the water perfectly. And just over the waters hang a

yellow sun aflame. She thought of the Underground, which were only tracks, corridors, steps and escalators, and she still didn't have any sense of the depth, the vertical lines and levels of it. There were no great hills, which she could climb to get a sense of the place like at home.

"Do you like it?" George asked. He had noticed what she was looking at.

She nodded.

"One of my dear friends made it for me," he answered and went silent.

She was sure that he had many dear friends. It felt as though he would have the same attentive, caring eyes to whomever he was talking to.

"I like it. You have a window with a great view!"

"Yes, it must be the best room you can get around here," he said and chuckled like a little child.

"How long have you lived here?"

"Oh, many years, I forget how many. But the time I have been here, I feel people have made good use of me," George said and smiled.

"But what is it you do?" she asked quietly as if she was treading on forbidden grounds.

"Sit down, my friend," George said and pulled out a chair for her to sit on.

On the desk he had a big water pitcher, which he took and poured water from into two glasses. They both drank in silence, and it was as though time didn't move in the concrete cubicle, which, although there were no air machines, had a pleasant cool feeling to it.

In the quietness, she thought she heard a humming and she turned in her seat and realized that it didn't come from the closed door but from herself, somewhere deep within, below the lines of the bridges and skyscrapers where nothing had any familiar forms. George sat quietly as if waiting for someone or something. When he finally spoke, he looked directly at her.

"I realize this all may seem very strange to you. I admire your courage and I hope you choose to come back some time," he paused.

"I founded this center to teach others to be able to heal themselves and others, but since the Ustodians have banned any kind of spiritual work and activity we keep it to ourselves until they are ready to listen. We practice different kinds of eastern methods like meditation and yoga, if you are familiar with that. These times are hard like the ancient scriptures foretold. The world has been out of balance for a long time, too long it seems. It's time for as many of us to learn about and practice compassion. And our love for the Universe and every living being is part of it. It's been the dark age for a long time..." George lingered as if he remembered something, which caused him pain.

And then the humming in her came back like a bad itch that wouldn't disappear. She had to look away from the sudden graveness of his voice and the space within. It confused and scared her.

"Sera, all life are connected. We aren't alone. But we have to face most of life's struggles on our own. Some of us have been given the gift to help stop the destructive cycles of life and understand how to show

people that they are all connected to life, a higher level of life. Some of us know the light of heaven and we are here to spread it. With a greater collective awareness, we can heal what we thought was lost. There are always reasons, there is always a path.”

“How did you know about all of this?” she asked, surprising herself with the question. How could he speak so freely about higher meanings and yet be so pleasant to be with? He wasn't preaching, only sharing.

“Well, how do we know how to walk when we grow up? How do we know right from wrong? How do we know we really exist? I don't exactly know, I rather sense. And I listen to the voices and images within, which the Universe presents to me. All the answers can be found within. Our inner universe and voice is the true key to gaining knowledge.”

“You hear voices?” she asked quietly, unsure whether she wanted to hear his answer, but before he could answer, somebody knocked at the door, two gentle knocks just audible enough for both of them to notice.

“Yes, come in!” George said.

A short woman with thick, black hair dressed in a suit that didn't seem to fit her comfortably, her body light and calm and the clothing stiff and tight entered the room. The woman first turned her face toward Sera, who was sitting the furthest away from the door, and gave her a friendly smile. Then she looked at George.

“What a pleasant surprise, Soledad. This is Sera,” George said and they both got up.

“Hi, Sera,” Soledad said and took her hand, holding it.

She stood there for a while, smiling and looking into Sera's eyes, scanning them openly.

“Am I disturbing you?” she asked, speaking to George.

“No, I was showing Sera around. I wanted to let her know that it would be a pleasure to all of us if she would come here once in a while. We would all gain from her presence,” George said and smiled again.

Sera began to wonder; how she would get back to the trains. How she could avoid showing her discomfort with the woman's hand, which stifled her into silence. When Soledad let go of her hand, it felt as if she could speak again. Her stomach and throat were no longer tight. Soledad walked over to George and gave him a short kiss.

“How are you?” George asked.

“I'm doing fine, trying to stay focused,” Soledad answered reluctantly.

“Keep that light burning, my love.”

Sera felt as if she no longer was there in the room. The melodies of their voices were removed, coming from another world. Their minds concentrated so much on each other that their words left her in a realm of her own. She sat down, and let her body fall back with a sigh. They stirred as if just returning from that other place. They looked at her and she felt their gazes pressing on her forehead. They smiled again.

"I think, I'd better get going," she started saying to relieve the pressure, but remained sitting.

"Are you okay?" George asked gently.

Sera nodded.

"Well, if you must leave, I will show you out," Soledad said. "I'm sure you have plenty to do here, George."

"One thing, I promised to do was to have a look at your foot, Sera," George said and walked over to Sera. "Which shouldn't take too long."

The quietness of the place overwhelmed her, as if it drowned all of her senses. Sera looked at the strange woman walking next to her down the corridor towards the stairs. She could hear muffled voices behind one of the doors. The woman looked so happy and radiant even in the scarce illumination from a few light bulbs.

"Would you like something to eat before you take off?" Soledad asked.

The rumbling in her stomach made the decision for her.

"I'm a bit hungry, if it's not too much trouble?" Sera said.

"I'm sure we can find something for you. We just leave a small donation."

They came to the end of the stairs. Soledad opened the door on their right. It was warmer inside the small kitchen. In one corner, there was an old electrical stove and a deep ceramic sink, in another a small refrigerator and shelves with fruit and vegetables. A small patch of light came through a shaft like the ones on the upper level. A table rested up against the corner, facing the door and three chairs and a small bench took up the rest of the space.

Over the table, there was a long row of shelves filled with grains, flour, cans, some plates, and cups. On the table stood a blooming pansy with violet and yellow flowers in a small brown pot like a relic of the past, which had survived all the hardships. Sera wondered how the plant could blossom in these subterranean parts where the only access to light came from bulbs and shafts. It had to be a miracle. The Lily Gardens had most of their flowers delivered weekly. This petite plant looked pretty settled in with the dirt on the sides of its pot.

Sera touched the soft petals and felt the moist soil on her finger. The flower was real and somebody took good care of it. She remembered vaguely her days as a small child under the sky, engrossed in tending the small vegetable patch her mother had given her full management of. The burning sun and the cool, slippery soil under her nails had smelled so wonderful.

"It looks like it's our lucky day!" Soledad exclaimed. She was bent over the sink where she had opened her bag and pulled out a paper bag of tomatoes.

"I bought these fresh tomatoes. That is how it works. You bring whatever you can afford and add it to the household. We don't have any access to money machines down here so those of us, who make a living

up there, bring the supplies. We want to make as little notice of ourselves as possible. The good thing about our new monetary system is that nobody believes it's possible that a group of people can survive down here without using their ID-cards. They think that their system is bulletproof. They think there is nothing they can overlook now," Soledad said, while she washed the tomatoes in a big pottery bowl she had filled with a little water. The water came from a big container underneath the sink.

Sera sat down on one of the wooden chairs near the table.

"Would you like a salad with some cold grains and nuts?"

"Yes, that sounds good," Sera said.

"You know raw foods tend to hold a denser amount of nutrition. Food shouldn't be heated too much, except for the grains and beans."

Soledad reached over to one of the shelves and took out a jar of walnuts.

"You can shell the walnuts. And tell me if there is something you don't eat or don't like," Soledad smiled and gave her a nutcracker; for herself she got a knife and a wooden cutting board, lettuce, carrots, and apples.

Sera started cracking the nuts, and the noise she made sounded like small fireworks. In between the cracking, she noticed a deep silence in the absence of Soledad's melodious voice. There were no radio, no TV, no neighbors behind paper thin walls, just a network of dark corridors, which sheltered them from the other world of endless crowds.

She still wondered about the flower, where the air came from, why their business had to be kept so much to themselves, why the smiles on everyone's face. She kept silent, nervous about Soledad's voice that seemed to reach all the way into her inner guts where her stomach was roaring, crying out for being filled up. One of the nuts was hard to crack and she stubbornly fought the brown, smooth shell, but it didn't give in; and a large piece of her nail got caught in the metal tool and broke.

"Damn it," she exclaimed.

"What's wrong?" Soledad turned around and walked over to the table.

She had filled the bowl up. The orange of the carrots and the red of the tomatoes looked like patches of paints on soft, green grass. Sera couldn't take her eyes off it, as if she was afraid that it would disappear the moment she blinked.

"You're bleeding," Soledad said and took her hand.

"Oh, I just broke a nail," Sera said. Surprised by Soledad's sudden touch, Sera pulled her hand back and sucked on her finger.

"Give me your finger, I can help you," Soledad said calmly.

"I'm fine, thank you," Sera said and avoided her gaze. "I've cracked enough nuts, anyway."

When the salad was done, Soledad served it on their plates and sat down quietly. Sera watched her closely. As she picked up her fork to fill her empty stomach with the crisp, colorful elements, she noticed

that Soledad had closed her eyes. She stayed like that for a long time, her hands resting on her legs. Sera froze and looked down on her plate. Her grandparents had always done their silent prayers before dinner when she was a kid. She had never then understood what went on, since Mia didn't participate in her parents' ways. Mia had her own ways of doing things. Even so, Sera had now a warm feeling in her chest despite her hunger. She realized that this meal like all other meals she had was the reason why her body functioned; it was the main source for her living. She felt grateful and imagined that was what Soledad felt too in the focused stillness.

They ate in silence surrounded by the comfortable kitchen walls. For a moment, Sera no longer felt the other walls and the vaults of darkness beyond.

"It's so cozy here, I feel like I'm home," Sera said.

"I meant to ask you before, where you come from. You don't look like a New Yorker."

"No, I come from Auckland, in Aotearoa."

"How is it there?" Soledad asked.

Her eyes lit up like a child wanting to hear a story. The insistence in her eyes gave Sera some courage. It was as though Aotearoa no longer existed, it had become a tale that she shared with strangers. She had become the storyteller.

"We don't live in the Underground, because the air isn't lethal. We only have to protect ourselves from the strong sun. So I'm all wrapped up in thin clothes, because my skin is very sensitive to the rays. My mother and I live near the ocean. Our house is on a hill overlooking other hills and the water. We have a beautiful white and gray cat with bright yellow eyes. Her name is Ea after my Grandma. The ocean is only an hour's hike away from our house. We have great hills, black and white beaches. It's very green and blue there, even on cloudy days," Sera said and smiled.

"What about your father?"

"He died in an accident, when I was little. It has just been the two of us for many years."

Soledad nodded and smiled.

"You are brave to come here, it's ...," Soledad lingered for a second.

"You know Aotearoa sounds a little like Peru where I'm from. Only I have never been at the ocean. We lived inland near the mountains. It was very pretty and peaceful, but also very poor. It's so far away that it seems more like a dream to me now," Soledad said and sighed.

"So when did you come here?" Sera asked.

"I came here with my parents and sister when I was six. That was after the Final War and the restoration period, in the mid-twenties, when the country opened its borders for new immigrants again. My parents thought it would be a good new beginning in a world of great opportunities. I guess, it was in some ways..." Soledad said and looked absent-minded for a brief moment. Then she smiled again.

"I guess it's a world of opportunities because people so strongly believe it is. Have throughout time.

Well, you grow to like it. It is after all what you make of it. You take up the challenge and try to get the best out of it. It doesn't really matter where we live, as long as we live from our hearts.... But what about you, what brought you here?"

"To study psychology," Sera answered.

"You couldn't study that at home?"

"Yeah, I could have, I guess."

"But you decided to come here?"

"Yes. I applied and got the perfect scholarship."

"It's strange how life turns out, but I'm glad you came," Soledad said and smiled while munching on a piece of carrot.

It felt like something had changed when Sera stepped into their apartment. Maybe it was something between Selma and her, or perhaps it was something within. Maybe it was just that the door creaked a little more than usual or that she had already eaten and was too full to look forward to their home cooking. She stepped into their small corridor and stood all still for a moment, listening for any familiar sounds.

"Hello! I am home," she said and thought she heard an echo somewhere deep in her throat.

Frank had been there, the corridor smelled of cigarette smoke. They had not seen each other for a long time since Selma got back together with Frank. Sera had wanted to talk to her many times, but something had always come up.

She stepped into the living room. The TV set was still on, but on low volume. On the floor Selma's papers and books were spread out like leaves on an autumn day and Sera had to watch where she stepped. The place felt empty, like an abandoned ship.

She sat down on the couch, turned off the TV and took out one of her schoolbooks. She started reading, but was distracted by the smell and warmth of the kitchen in the Underground, the patches of vegetables in the big bowl and Soledad's warm gaze, which like some supernatural force made her heart beat faster.

Then the phone rang; a loud screech that made her ears rustle. It was Doru. His voice was metallic and formal, as if he was talking to an answering machine. He wanted to see her, and asked her if she wanted to see him again. He really enjoyed her company, he told her.

She smiled to herself, but said very little. She couldn't completely believe what he was saying. His voice sounded different not. She wanted to tell him about George and the center, but couldn't get out of the vacuum she so comfortably found herself in. Even with the few words exchanged, they managed to set up another date. As she hung up, she wondered if seeing him was still safe.

Selma came home two hours later, her eyes drowsy, and her lips trembling.

“Hi Selma. Where have you been?” Sera asked as Selma came into the living room.

“Where were you? I was worried,” Selma said in a matter-of-fact way, her eyes flickering like a flashlight running out of batteries.

“I was with friends, and you?”

“With Frank. Who else!”

Her voice was sharp and merciless. Selma sat down in the couch beside her.

“Are you happy?” Sera asked carefully, unsure what to say if Selma decided to answer her. But Selma didn’t look as if she had heard a word.

“I’ve missed you, Selma,” Sera tried again. “I wanted to tell you....”

“What?”

“You know, about stuff. I haven’t seen much of you....”

For a moment, Sera thought that Selma would put on her coat and leave again but Selma remained, planted firmly on the couch. They sat like that for a long time. Maybe it was just a matter of time before something would happen. Somewhere in the building a baby started crying, but only for a brief, heedless moment until someone had hushed it to silence, again. Sera had never heard a baby cry before in the building. In fact, she had never seen any children in the city. She wondered if what she had heard was really a baby crying, or if that too wasn’t real, like the sounds humming in her head.

Selma got up and started tidying up the floor.

“What a mess I’ve made,” she mumbled to herself.

“I’ll make some coffee, would you like some?” Sera asked and got up slowly, her legs sore from sitting in the same position for a long time.

“Sounds good.”

In the soft light from the candles they had lit and put out on the kitchen table, the grimness on Selma’s face seemed to loosen up.

“How’s your school work?”

“Good. Has been a bit boring without your input,” Sera said and smiled. “How are you doing with all your projects?”

“I’m getting there, been working a lot on campus. What happened to that guy you were seeing? You didn’t do anything silly?” Selma asked, smirking. And Sera knew that Selma would never believe what she had done.

“I’m seeing him again,” Sera said and smiled proudly.

“No! Then he must be something, or you are crazy! Tell me more, girl!”

“Well, his name is Doru. He is beautiful. He has fine black hair and a slender body.”

“But what does he do? Does he have money?”

“He helps people,” Sera blurted out, wishing she hadn’t spoken about him to begin with. The truth

was she had no clue of what his job really was about, other than some kind of teaching. It had not been that important at the time. There had just been the two of them, nothing else.

“What?”

“Yeah, he is a teacher. He told me he is a teacher,” Sera added and looked into the cup sitting on the table in front of her. The black liquid surface looked impenetrable.

“A teacher? That’s what he told you? Obviously not at the university. I haven’t heard of any Doru. You be careful. What if he is involved in all that voodoo cult stuff. It still happens. I just heard on the news. They are relentless, they stick at nothing. They snatch anything that has a pair of legs and a head on the shoulders.”

Selma took a big, loud slurp and looked at her roommate, classmate and girlfriend with the long, uncombed, thin, reddish hair, the timid smile and the solemn, longing eyes. Selma was just about to ask another question, when she decided to change course.

“So what’s up with you, sour face? Time for bed?”

“I guess,” Sera said, still feeling discontent.

There were so many thoughts she wanted to share, but she was too afraid that all those people and places she had seen would disintegrate the moment she spoke about them. As long as they were in her mind they seemed real, sometimes even more ample than the familiar.

Sleep came easily to her that night and she drifted into a dreamless state where there was only sweet, blissful oblivion. It felt like falling into soft velvet, which caressed her skin which had stopped shivering from the voices that vibrated through her.

o o o o o

She walks among the pilgrims with her few belongings on her back and her dreams of a better, happier world in her chest. I see her proudly raising her body to move forward toward a higher state together with all of these other beings. There is a longing in her, which is greater than any desire of the world, of the body.

I stand in the dusty and stifling heat of a faraway country. Hidden by the walls of the ditch, I wait for her to pass by. She is alone. Alone in the crowd. Strong warrior at heart, but fragile for this age of ignorance and destruction, where war is close at hand, so close that you can smell it on people's breaths. She doesn't see me, we are from separate worlds, and a wall separates us. I have the key to see through the veils. I have the gift to bring the two worlds together. She is the mother I have dreamt of, who brought me life. I climb up on the small ditch and cry out her name.

Warrior, I am over here!

There are hundreds of them and I am afraid that they will all turn to me. I, the intruder. They walk on except her. She turns and stops to smile at me, not with the look of recognition, but with the smile of love. Love

from a strong heart. Love that is free and open. She points to me to join her. We walk all night together in the vast procession, as if it were just the two of us. I listen to her stories, I listen to her gifts, I listen to her love. She moves me, and I know I know her so well. I long for that warrior heart, which is somewhere in me. She gave it to me through the seed that grew in her once.

VIII. Controlling the Fire

Outside, between the drawn curtains, heavy, silvery and blue clouds were hanging above the many rooftops. The shrouded light still made her squint.

“So what if it rains,” Sera mumbled to herself, as she sat down on the edge of the window frame.

“I won’t need an umbrella, unless....” she smiled.

She just remembered that she would see Doru later on. Maybe she would need an umbrella after all, if he had more places to show her. But it wasn't plausible that umbrellas were to be found anywhere. It wasn't a city affected by the seasons.

Since Doru had taken her up to the Grounds, she had often day dreamed about the deserted streets and the hilly park, within grasp and yet miles away. She couldn't believe that no one knew about the ground air. She longed to go back, but not without him. She longed to hold his hand again, not to reject it. She was tired of speculating who he was. If she was just a pursuit to him, what would that really mean to her? Would he abduct her, take her to his cult and convert her into his order after having taken advantage of her? Did she really believe that? She smiled to herself. Maybe it wouldn't be so horrible for her to be with him. At least, her life would have adventure and stimulation.

The weight of the clouds pressed tightly on her forehead, and yet they moved so swiftly over the sky. How was that possible when they were so heavy? Was there any logic to this? She was 55% water and she couldn't fly or even move so swiftly. How could the clouds burdened by so much water still move like that, and she would have no energy to begin her day? Did water not weigh anything in the sky? She needed the kind of energy the sky held; that kind of dynamic enthusiasm that didn't give way to anything or like fire grasping relentlessly, moving boundaries. She couldn't pursue the sky, though. It had to come to her. She pressed her face against the window and thought she could hear the wind roaring on the other side of the cold glass. The wind could reach her by pressing its might against the glass.

“I’m right here. Come and get me. I give up, you win,” she whispered to herself. *And if you can push those clouds away, can you take me away too,* she thought. *Just anywhere.*

“Are you talking to me?” Selma asked from behind her closed door.

“No,” she answered, surprised that Selma was awake.

Selma opened her door and stepped into the living room.

“I think, it’s going to rain,” Sera said and looked at Selma.

“So?” Selma said indifferently, and rubbed her eyes. “What are you doing up so early in the day?”

“I thought, I might get some work done, and catch a glimpse of the daylight outside.”

“Are you getting enough sleep, you look so tired?” Selma asked and came over to the window.

“Oh, I still can’t get used to this,” she added and looked out of the window. “It’s so big out there.”

Her eyes gazed for a brief moment, and then they started to move nervously away from the view.

“It’s beautiful out there. Just imagine the wind....”

“Yes, but that’s Aotearoa,” Selma interrupted. “That out there, on the other hand,” Selma said and pointed her finger at the window not looking straight at it. “Is good for nothing. I’d rather live in here forever.”

“But what if it’s safe now? Have you ever wondered about that?” Sera asked quietly.

“But it isn’t. The Ustodians keep us informed on these matters. We fucked up this world seriously, now we have to pay for it. It could be much worse. I kind of like it here. We are provided for so well, you know. We don’t have to leave ever.” Selma looked self-content. “You’re a dreamer, Sera. Why did you come back?”

“I couldn’t just leave all of this. I have come so far in my studies. I want to have this degree. Besides I don’t want to leave you,” Sera said and felt a sadness tickling in her eyes.

“Well, I’m glad you are here, but you shouldn’t worry about me, I can take care of myself,” Selma answered and walked into the kitchen. *But can I? Sera thought. Would I have anywhere to go now that Mia is selling the house, our house?*

“Are you hungry? I’m gonna fix up some food,” Selma said, as she stuck her head into the room.

“No thanks. I think, I’ll go to the library and do some work.”

The largest and oldest library was located two tunnels away from the Grand Central Station, which since the 20’s had only functioned as a local underground station. Because of the dangers of contamination most railway systems throughout the East Coast had been closed down and all out-of-city transport now took place by aircrafts. The Ustodians hadn't yet found a way to rebuild the railways, which meant that the people of New York lived isolated with very little possibility to travel to Canada, the West Coast and Florida, where there were no danger zones.

To get to the hall, Sera had to make a long detour from the trains on the lower levels, climbing first one long set of stairs; then passing through a long, sparingly lit tunnel before entering the hall. People rarely visited the Grand Central hall. Sometimes, they used the space for exhibitions, but since it took a lot of electricity to light up the place, the Ustodians always decided on who and what the hall could be used for. Selma had showed her the way, one day when they had gone to the library together. Selma knew it from a time, when she had been invited to a big art exhibition. She had never told Sera how she managed to get hold of an invitation like that.

Sera walked through the great, old hall, which reminded her of a church, solemn and deserted of people. Her footsteps on the stone floor rumbled slightly. The rare occasion of people passing through, probably made it the most quiet public place in the city. There were no loudspeakers making their announcements here. She stopped in the center of the hall. When she closed her eyes, she opened up for the images. It was like opening her eyes in another place....

From the immense square church-like windows waterfalls of light fall in columns onto the floor of the main hall, which is pervaded with a busy blend of sounds from people, loudspeakers, ticket machines, ticket houses, the rustle of money and goodbye hugs. There are women with babies in carriages, or dogs in shopping bags. People are standing on the proud, elegant staircases, looking down onto the hall. An old man sell newspapers while young men hang out lecherously in the corners of the station, or near the fat square stone pillars and coffee shops, always on the look out.

She looked down at the shiny, black tiled floor, and saw a reflection of her body hunched over; it looked like a face on a thick pole. The center of the vault was just above her. She spread her arms, and stretched her neck and head toward the ceiling.

I'm the center of the universe, she sang in her mind and rotated her body, feet, legs, arms, and head, around in a small, slow circle. She felt giddy and silly. Where did it come from? Had the wind chased the heavy water-packed clouds away and the fiery, powerful sun had emerged from its hideout?

She noticed him from a distance; he was walking with a little boy. She slowed down to watch him pass by. He was holding the boy's hand. They seemed in a hurry. His face was grave except from his gentle mouth that spoke quietly, soothingly to the boy. Then suddenly, as quickly as they had appeared, they disappeared. When she ran further up to the crossing street tunnel, where they had appeared, they were out of sight. She didn't stop running until she came to the library.

She pulled one of the two iron rings of the heavy wooden doors and opened them. They were always lighter than they appeared and every time it surprised her. The main entrance of the library was on the second level of the Underground. It always felt like entering a castle taken out of a Gothic 19th century novel, with the darkly built rooms made of brown bricks or wood, the heavy wooden furniture and the rows of bookshelves covering every wall. There were three great reading halls with seats and tables for about 250 people. With a special pass, books could be checked out, but the general rule was that books had to be read on the premises, so silence was observed and respected.

o o o o o

Doru enjoyed the company of Hans more and more. Even though the kid rarely spoke much about himself, he participated more and more in conversations at the center, and constantly asked questions

about them and the teachings. Doru realized now how much purer the instinct of a child was. They were so much closer to the essence of life and would quickly under the right guidance become immensely inspirational to everyone around them. Hans' energy and curiosity inspired him and made him look at the world as through the eyes of a young being with the same pure openness.

Hans thrived well in the group and had adapted very easily to the pathway systems under the trains and near the center. It seemed as if Hans had always lived there, as if he had not, in fact, run away. Doru was worried of making a decision on what to do with the kid. Was he really better off in the Underground? He had considered taking him above, but was afraid of the consequences that might have. Even when taking Sera, he had run a huge risk. He had almost scared away the beautiful treasure, he had found, by his eagerness.

He walked through the doors to the library. He loved the silence of the place, which was observed and respected like in a church, although in the library there was still a lot of activity going on, with people reading and walking between the aisles of books. He felt the meditative effects the silence had on the place; like in a garden full of plants, trees, and flowers, a cool and invigorating energy pervaded which impelled inspiration and clarity.

In this silent, timeless space, he had experienced the deepest form of spiritual practice, in which he had merged with the Universe. He had been hunting for a particular book that day, about the practice of Taoism. One of his students had been asking questions, he couldn't answer at the top of his head.

He had gone down an aisle, which was rarely used, as if people were afraid of what they might find there. The books there were normally of a more religious kind. It wasn't forbidden to read about religion, because the Ustodians wanted people to know about the doings and makings of religious people. Of course, that didn't mean that all literature was available. But he had been lucky from time to time. He knew there were some of the librarians that found it hard to throw out books, so they were kept in their own special section. He hadn't meant to meditate in a public place like that, he had just meant to sit down on the floor to rest a little and take a look at the book he had found. He fell into a deep meditation, which quickly, as if the gods were giving him a hand, moved into a blissful, awakened state. He had felt the turning of the earth, the rustling of people's skin, the sky outside. He had become one with everything and nothing. He knew that there was peace in everything that the seeds of the Divine were in everybody. He could see and feel it; like flower buds inside of the body. In some people, it was blossoming and he saw the spirit wrapping itself in the body, the body receiving, and the spirit giving.

He entered the hall where the section of Eastern philosophy along with other humanistic fields was located. Here he spent most of his spare time, if he didn't decide to pay the Grounds a visit. He didn't recognize her at first, hunched over the books on the table while scribbling notes onto a pad next to her. In the end it was her fine, long red hair that gave her away like the first time he had seen her on the train going to Inwood. He could have sworn that she wasn't a student but it appeared otherwise. He found

himself longing to know more about her spirit.

He watched her for a while; how her eyes were constantly on the pages or on the paper. Once in a while, her hair would fall in front of her face and one hand would immediately sweep it away in a gentle, intuitive motion like a curtain being drawn to welcome the sunlight.

“Hi Sera,” he said quietly and was warmed by the attentive eyes that met him.

“Hi!” she said surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“The same as you.”

“Are you a student?”

“Not really. I study eastern philosophy on my own and teach it to my students.”

Suddenly they were both aware of the eyes around them trying to hush their voices by thought.

“Whoops, we better whisper,” she whispered and he found a chair and sat down beside her.

They spoke to each other gently, skin to skin, so that they wouldn’t disturb the silence, and the words carried with them an intensity that made him want to hold her and fill her up with his love.

“So you study and teach eastern philosophy. You know my room-mate warned me that you might abduct me and take me to your sect!” she whispered pleased into his ear.

She felt courageous.

“You seem in a good mood today,” he said and smiled.

He liked looking at her. Admiring that frail, soft skin was almost like touching it.

“I guess,” she whispered after a moment deep in thought as if she had to search hard for words. “Well, it is nice to see you again, so soon.”

“Yes, indeed,” he whispered and added, “you are such a beautiful delight.”

She went silent, her face filled with quiet, bashful smiles. He glanced at her books.

“Well, it looks like you have plenty to do. Why don’t we meet here in a while? I want to see if there is any interesting reading. It is hard to get hold of since they banned any religious practices.”

He gave her a small kiss on her cheek; her skin was warm and soft. He wished that he could soon take it all in. He steered toward the back wall with the philosophical and religious books. Then as he lingered at the first row of the book shelves, and looked behind him, half expecting her to stand there smiling, he realized that he had not told her when he would be back.

o o o o o

“Thank you for class. We’ll meet here next week,” Soledad said and people started packing and changing clothes. It had been a pleasant class, and now she felt light and giddy. She waited until everybody had left. Sometimes one of her students would come up after the class to ask personal questions.

“Soledad, would you like a cup of tea before you go?” Carrie asked.

“No, thank you. I think I’d better go,” she answered, surprised by her own reply. She had nowhere to go but home. Maybe she needed that space. She would go home and meditate.

She waited for a long time for the elevator to show up. The lights were still malfunctioning. He had not shown up for class, and she couldn’t help feeling responsible. He obviously felt uncomfortable. He had been in her thoughts all week; there was something, which drew her to him. She wanted to know more about that feeling in her. The Universe was reaching out for her in some mysterious way. Despite the crudeness in his voice and the way it tried to bait her, he captivated her by the strong perseverance in his eyes. For a brief moment, there in the elevator, she had felt an enticing energy. Maybe it was the vulnerability, he showed her so openly without knowing.

In the tunnels, she passed a man, who wore a big bowler hat. She smiled to him. The man slowed down, took off his hat and curtsied.

“Good evening. Such a beautiful and kind smile, you have,” he said.

She smiled again.

“God bless you,” he replied quietly, still moving slowly past her.

They had formed a circle with their slow, attentive movements. Like birds they performed a mating dance, round in a ring, never losing sight of one another. It all lasted for a brief moment. Shakti moved through her.

She is the light. She brings us vitality and inspiration. She lies dormant in every woman and man like a serpent ready to slough and transform. She is here to realize the latent link to Him, Shiva. She can break down the opposites, which imprison us in the realm of matter. She can enlighten the world by awakening the great Shiva.

*Sivah saktya yukto ysdi bhavati saktah prabhavitum;
na ce devam devo na khalu kusalah spanditum api;
Atas tvam aradhyam hari-hara-virincadibhir api
pranatum stotum va katham akarta-punyah prabhvati.*

Soledad was ready to give herself to Shiva. She felt the link strengthening, like she was drawing somebody’s attention from the opposite side of a great river. The river had a strong current, but she still wanted to cross it. *I love you*, she whispered in her mind and felt giddy from the bubbling stream of life that flowed in her.

Matthew stood near the turnstiles, his hands moving nervously through the little, blond hair that had been spared the scissors’ cut. She was curious about those green eyes of his. She stopped and gazed inward. *‘Heavenly mother, I offer you the fruits of my activities, please take them all,’* she said in her mind and felt energy running through her upright spine.

He noticed her when she started walking again, and gave her a smile of relief.

“Hi Matthew,” she said and smiled. “What a nice surprise,” she added and gave him a gentle hug.

He looked seriously at her for a little while, before his mouth began to relax and turned into a smile.

“Hi,” he said.

“Waiting for someone?”

He nodded.

“I thought you were never going to come.... I’m sorry I didn’t come to your class today. I got caught up.”

“Well, it’s good to see you now. We can walk to the trains together, if you like.”

“I wanted to say that...will you have time for a cup of something now?” he asked quietly.

Soledad closed her eyes and sensed something different about him. He didn’t carry the same energy with him this time. She felt that the element of fire in him was more present. He emitted more determination.

“Okay then,” she answered and smiled. “I know a nice place, we can go to in my neighborhood.”

She quickly changed her mind about bringing in him to the center, and instead she took him to The Diva at Tribeca. The cafe was situated two levels below the trains. They descended a narrow line of spiral stairs and passed a street tunnel, which looked like a factory, embellished with pipes in all sizes and colors, hanging on or running through the ceilings and walls.

The Diva was busy for a weeknight, and they had to wait for a table and seats. He hadn’t touched her hand once, and she seriously considered, if he had just come from a funeral, his face grave and silent. It was a big place full of old heavy couches, armchairs and small and large coffee tables, which looked like they had been bought from an antique shop. They fell into a soft couch and a waiter gave them the menus. In the ceilings, there were more pipes and tubes, but they were placed in a height that didn’t make them seem as compressive as in the tunnels. One of Bach’s symphonies came out from somewhere among the pipes. She had never been able to locate where the loudspeakers were hidden.

“Isn’t it a nice place?” she asked him and fell even further into the soft, spring-less texture of the couch.

“I rarely go out. But this is one place I like to go to. I forget how nice it can be.”

She looked around comfortably. People were talking, while drinking and eating. The room was flooded with a pleasant flow of energy, like water it moved through them with serenity. Then she gazed at him, directed all her attention on him. He was looking at the menu. Indecisively, he skimmed the page again and again. *Talk to me*, she thought. *Or touch me*.

“Did you have a good week?” Soledad tried and decided that she wouldn’t push him any further.

Maybe he needed more time to start speaking. She felt like stroking his cheeks, looking deeper into those eyes, and exploring the mystery of his compassionate hands. The Goddess would guide her, she

could feel her energy flowing through her.

“No,” the word flew out of his mouth like a cannon ball and hit her with a blow. He paused for a moment.

“I wanted to say that I am sorry for my behavior last week,” he continued quietly, looking down at the menu.

“What would you like?” the waiter suddenly asked from above.

“Oh, just two herb teas, whatever you have,” Soledad answered lightly, smiling to the man who quickly took off, forgetting to take the menus with him.

Matthew looked at her pleadingly for an instant, his eyes open and contemplative.

“Apology accepted. I appreciate your concern, Matthew. Maybe you should be more concerned about yourself.”

So-hum, bring light to us, So-hum, Soledad hummed inside and took his hands. The energy in the room seemed to have changed or was it just the tenderness, she felt that had intensified?

When the waiter returned, their lips were touching slightly as if burning hot. He put the cups on the table and left them without saying anything. This time he remembered to take the menus.

“You’ve been watching me for a long time, haven’t you?” Soledad asked as she pulled away from him gently.

“I know where you live and work,” he answered.

“Why didn’t you visit me then?”

He shrug his shoulders.

“You’re strange, Matthew. I still like you, though. I enjoy touching you. You shouldn’t worry so much. The Divine is in all of us, guiding us if we let it in.”

Soledad took a sip of the hot contents of the cup. It burned the tip of her tongue, so she sniffed the steam instead.

“Peppermint,” she said. “My favorite tea. Isn’t that just amazing?”

“You talk a lot,” Matthew answered.

“Not really. Maybe it’s just because you aren’t saying anything. One of us has to say something or else...” she lingered.

“Or else?” he asked bravely and smirked.

He has so many different faces that man, Soledad thought, as she put the cup down next to his untouched one. As she turned around, she kissed him with all the desire she had for him.

o o o o o

The air was getting hotter. They walked down dark tunnels, going further downwards. In places the

lighting was so poor that it felt like they were diving in deep water, descending to parts, where the light could no longer reach them. Her breathing was steady as if his hand helped her stay calm. Sera smiled to herself when she felt the excitement of going into the unknown, conquering the fears awaiting her in the darkness of this underworld.

She felt safe now, his hand in hers, and the sound of their solid steps on the hard, stone ground. When was the last time she had held hands with a man? When had she felt that union of soft, warm skin? Had she ever had that experience? Was it just a work of the imagination that made her believe it had happened before? She wondered why it always felt like the first time every time she met someone new. Was she genetically uncut for that part of life? Was she that percentage of women who didn't have the right genes? They said that they liked it like that, men; to have a woman who was practically innocent. They would pay a lot of money to have a woman like that. She failed to understand why that was so.

Doru took her to "Little Gandhi", a small Indian restaurant, located three levels under the rails. The rumbling of the trains was scarcely audible here; only the vibrating earth could be felt. The front of the restaurant was set up like a diner with small tables and a bar-like counter where you could order hot and cold drinks, milkshakes, ice cream in glass, bread, pies, cakes and quick meals. She could see the cakes behind a big glass counter and her mouth guiltily started craving the sweets.

When they entered the back, walking through a long corridor, she noticed the strange, new aromas, so different from the fat and sweetness of the diner. A blend of fennel, cumin, turmeric, curry and other spices she couldn't place, absent in the repertoire of Selma's cooking, filled the heavy, hot air. She thought she could hear the roars and rumbles of the burning bowels of the earth. Here deep underneath the surface of the world, it felt they had come closer to the sun's hot and light substance and its ungraspable, ever-expanding shape. Its dynamic and electrical energy ignited her for a moment.

At the end of the corridor, she was surprised to step into a small garden yard. Thick glass walls surrounded the yard, and beyond them was darkness. Tables and chairs were placed all around the yard, and as if they were out under the sky, there were small patches of grass, bushes and trees. From above soft, warm yellow light fell on the green areas and created a sense of scattered daylight in the midst of the nocturnal atmosphere of the place. When they sat down at their table, and the waiter had given them the menus, she reached out to touch the grass, expecting the lush, fresh feel of a growing plant, but it was dry and stiff.

"I don't think, it's possible to grow anything this deep under the surface," he said seriously.

"I guess. It looks so real, though," she said disappointedly and stared at the green, still unable to comprehend.

He read aloud from the menu for her, telling her which meals were good. They only served vegetarian meals.

"Are you a vegetarian?" he asked her.

“Practically, since there is very little access to meat around here,” she answered and noticed that he didn’t seem too pleased with her answer. But he didn’t make any comments.

He ordered for them both. She had never tried what they were getting, but he assured her it would be delicious. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine that they were out under the sky like the first day they had been together. She had felt much more comfortable then, maybe because there was so much space, so much air to breathe even through the mask.

“Sera, will you come back to my place after dinner?” he looked at her intensely.

His eyes sunk deeper into her skin, reaching something isolated within, which like Grendel, the monster had been hiding, below the dark, cold lake water, sheltered from the playful sunlight that danced on the greens, browns and blues of the land above. If she could only break through the masses of water above her, she wouldn’t have to hide anymore. There would be a forceful burst and then the surface. When she finally came up to feel the warm light, would she then be able to stay above? Would she learn to swim and float?

She saw her own face form a smile, nose slightly wrinkled, teeth showing, her cheeks raised. It felt like a smile, but her fingers were moving nervously, like run-aways, under the edge of the table. He moved his hands over toward her, anticipating. She had to decide what she wanted.

“We can have a cup of tea. It’s very peaceful in my building. I just want to spend a little time with you. I won’t do anything you don’t want to do,” he said.

Returning, her hands moved up on the table, and they dropped into his. He started caressing them, following the lines in her palms. She felt a sudden rush of tickling sensations running through her.

“Okay,” she said in a matter-of-fact voice, unable to know if she was being controlled by an external force, which poked in the embers of her curiosity, or by the warm waves of feelings washing over her.

His place smelled familiar. They entered his small corridor and put their shoes near the door on a shoe rack. The scent kept her mind preoccupied for a long time; it was so familiar and yet she couldn’t recall where she had encountered it before. When they came into his living room, where two curtain-less windows, like two open eyes, were looking into or through the world, she remembered.

Her mother’s old ramshackle of a house on the hill, which after many hard and long years still stood, its paints peeling off, its pipes leaking and its roof full of cracks, overlooked the distant waves, which surfers were riding on, and wind surfers jumping off. From their house they could watch the coming and goings of the winds by the colors of the ocean. On very windy days, the waves would be green with white crispy tops, and the scents of the salty water would reach her window. On calm days, when the waves would be deep blue, a true reflection of the sky, it was the aroma of the ferns, trees, and flowers that engrossed her senses. That was the familiar smell.

He smiled and looked at her.

“Please feel at home here. Would you like some tea?”

The living room floor, besides scattered papers and books, was left pretty stripped. Up against one wall there was a couch, against the other a drawer and on top of it a mirror and more books. There was no TV, only a small CD player and a computer.

She walked with him into the kitchen where there was a small table and two chairs. He filled the kettle and put it on the stove. When he opened the cupboards to get cups and tea, she noticed that they were half empty, the space only occupied by noodles and other heat-up-with-water foods, tea and a few cups and plates. The narrow kitchen window, also curtain-less, was half open and a feeble breeze circulated in the room. It was black outside, a starless and moonless sky like under the Grounds. Not even a tiny light could be seen, everything had been hidden away in the world outside. She wondered what his view would be like, and if she would ever experience it. If she stayed the night, she would wake up to it in the morning.

Every step and movement he made had a purpose and seriousness to it; even as he took the tea out of the cupboard, put the tea bags in a big pot, and as he poured the hot water meticulously, as if every drop was dear to him, a sacred element he was honoring. She longed to be those drops if even for a moment.

“What’s your view like?” she finally asked to divert his attention to her.

He didn’t speak until he had finished pouring. Then he turned to her and smiled acknowledgingly as if he knew her thoughts.

“You can see the park and the ruins from here. You know, there used to be a small tower where we went to, which was part of the Cloisters. I found pictures of it at the library. It was quite beautiful.”

He gave her the two cups and carried the pot.

“Let’s go and sit in the living room, the couch is more comfortable.”

He touched her waist with his free hand and the warmth of it hit her, as if she had been ice cold.

The cup with the hot liquid warmed her hands, and she sniffed the steam of peppermint and chamomile. She liked the difference in its smell and feel from her usual cup of coffee. At home tea was still the most popular hot beverage, an old custom the British had introduced to the country. She glanced at the darkness outside trying to find another burning light, maybe someone else had taken down the protective curtains too. Then she noticed the silence. No noise from radio or TV filtered their thoughts, no trains rattled in the background, no voices broke through, and it was just the two of them beside one another. She knew he was looking at her, and she felt she had to say something to avoid having to look into his eyes.

“It’s so dark outside, as if we were out in the country and not in a big city,” she said quietly.

“Yes, it’s strange, but maybe it will change soon,” he answered.

“How can it change?”

“With faith and compassion, we can stop the vicious circle. Anything in this world can be used to

move us in the right direction. It's all energy, part of a whole. The dark can be our guide to know where we want to go, to lead us to the light of the world. Eventually, it will happen, you'll see," he said confidently.

"Ah," she uttered, as if it was the most logical thing he had said. Afterwards she wondered what he meant.

"Would you like to meditate again? This time a different form of meditation?" he asked and put his mug on the floor next to the teapot, walked over to the CD player and put a CD in it.

"I have some music here that is good for meditation. We can sit on chairs if that is more comfortable for you. Normally, I sit on a cushion here on the floor," he said and moved a pile of loose papers to clear some space.

He sat down on a big carpet that covered most of the floor. He crossed his legs, one foot stuck out and rested on his thigh. She put the mug on the floor and joined him without taking her eyes off him.

"I don't think, I can do that," she mumbled, but she surprised herself.

"That's good. Make sure your spine is straight and yet relaxed. The energy flows better that way. Here's a pillow, use that to support the tip of your behind. It seems to come very naturally to you," his voice purred gently.

His hands guided and helped her. She became eager to impress him, to win his unlimited attention. The music broke the silence gently with a soft piano and pan flute melody. The darkness outside became less threatening, less black. They closed their eyes. He took her hands so that they formed a cycle. Their hands, resting in the small space between their bodies, were the only parts that connected them.

"Focus on the music and our arms joined. Feel the energy, focus in, and see where it brings you to," he whispered.

She let the music carry her away. It felt like drifting away from the body, the room, and the blackness into the realm of the music. Then she became aware of their hands and his presence opposite her. She thought of what he had talked about. *Energy*. She let her mind focus on their arms. There was a weak vibration. She recognized it as energy circulating in and out of her hands and arms in the cycle like that day in the park. She followed the warm, tickling sensation up to her chest, where a greater sensation appeared more powerfully right between her breasts. It was a deep, forceful feeling, which filled her with a longing. It felt like there was only that part of her left. She was free, only had to worry about flying.

She didn't know how much time had passed when his hands moved a little. The music had stopped. She opened her eyes reluctantly, they were sore.

"How are you doing?"

"I don't know...it was quite fascinating. My chest," she said and held her hand to her chest to feel if it had changed. The throbbing was diminishing.

"There was a strange sensation."

"It's your Anahata chakra, the heart center. The music helps to activate it so that you can better feel it," he caressed her cheek and she thought he was going to kiss her.

"What are chakras?" she asked.

"Chakra is Sanskrit, which is an ancient Indian language, and it means wheel. A wheel of energy that sits on an axis just a few inches from our physical body. There are thousands of them on our body, but commonly we talk about six chakras and one center, the crown center, which unifies all the chakras. The chakras are connected to different glands and they all correspond and coordinate to different physical, psychic, mental and spiritual levels of the human being. The heart chakra coordinates love, affection, unselfishness, high esthetics, and acceptance. By becoming aware of our chakras we can work on ourselves and expand our consciousness, our gifts. Find a deeper balance and understanding of ourselves, the patterns we carry, and eventually transform ourselves."

Sera remembered that Grandma Ea used to have a picture of the different wheels hanging in her kitchen. In the picture, there was a naked woman, and on the respective places of her body round symbols wavered and next to them it said in Romanian what they represented. She never learned the language, so she couldn't read what it said. She remembered that she had always found it strange to hang a picture like that. In a kitchen.

"Do you want to try another CD?" Doru asked and looked at her with eyes of joy.

She nodded several times, hoping that whatever they were going to do would win her some time for clarity. Then the music flooded her ears and filled the room again. This time the sounds formed less of a melody, like ether light air running through pipes, entering her senses. She focused in, his hands touching hers, feeding her with a sharp energy. It almost made her want to cry. The energy moved up further to her throat and stayed there, buzzing like bees, creating commotion. And she entered a strange landscape, as if a force stronger than her, tore her into it...

I'm running through the woods, a bright green and brown landscape, light filters through branches and leaves. The earth is vibrant and I have to move fast, otherwise I might fall through its soft, live, running body. Then suddenly, the sound of a twig snapping makes me linger and I begin to fall. The world around me changes shape and its colors turn black and white. It feels like I'm falling through endless, square shafts of patterns. Then the voices break through like a fire flaring up, one welter of sound and language is inside of me and yet coming from somewhere else....

<aici nu este nici prea frig dar nici prea cald

ich werde nie wieder herkommen hier sind die tore zum Himmel

som en fugl glider jeg gennem luften og styrer mod jorden

solo el flotar dentro y fuera del mundo de los sentidos

si impigliano in ogni mia parte, tragandu-mamai jos,

ich fuehle ihre Zuneigung als ob es meine waere
isi aduce aminte ca a avut candva o alta mama
ci muoviamo con potere ed eleganza
hvornår kommer bussen, hvor er den?
abierto para una mejor comunicacion
olyan konnyll, hogy erintes nelkul tudom erezn
me recuerdo como el agua envuelve mi cuerpo>

The jumble of voices disappeared as quickly as they had taken over her senses; as if her body was no longer hers, only something she traveled in. They had made no sense to her, all compressed together, inseparable, yet loud enough for her to hear clearly. She opened her eyes that were full of salty water. It felt like drowning. Shivers of fear ran through her body.

“Sera, are you okay? Sera!”

More voices, she thought and believed for a moment she was still in the other reality. *Please, no more voices.*

“Sera,” he tried again.

First she felt his hands, then she saw his kind face, the big round eyes dark as the night and yet bright warm as the embers of a hot fire. One of his hands stroke her cheek again and she wanted to kiss it, but it seemed she couldn’t move her limbs. And she remembered that she was afraid of the voices in her head, afraid that when she closed her eyes they would return.

“I heard voices,” she stammered.

He nodded.

“I was in the woods, I was falling. I’m afraid,” she continued.

He wiped her tears away, one by one, patiently.

“The world can be a pretty scary place, but you are strong, you have traveled far to come here. You have a lot of light in you. You must learn not to be afraid of your gifts, my love.”

His voice was gentle, so were his strokes. He held her into his arms, caressing her hair. She had no words left in her. She just wanted to sleep, go to a place where there were no dreams or voices.

She got up on her sore legs. Her bladder was tight and aching. The toilet was crammed in between the washbasin and bathtub. She could barely fit her legs on the floor space of the tiny bathroom. The warm, spicy odor of the steady flow of urine reached her nostrils, when she bent down toward the floor, pressing her stomach together. A calm tiredness muffled her senses and the odor seemed pleasant.

“Sera, are you okay?”

“Yes,” she said.

The warm, murky tap water on her hands felt soothing. She let it run even after the soap had

disappeared down the drain. *Where did the water go?* She wondered. *Where did it come from?* At home they drank it straight from lakes or rainwater reservoirs.

“I’d like to show you some yoga postures, which will make it a little easier on you when you meditate,” he said.

“But I don’t want to meditate again,” she answered frightened.

“I’m not sure it matters, your throat chakra, Visuddha is very charged. And this is not the first experience you’ve had, is it?” he said and looked at her with deep concern.

Sera nodded and avoided his gaze, as if she had been behaving badly.

On the floor, he showed her different positions, which he told her to stay in as long as she could. It was important that she’d do them as often as possible to balance out any impurities and make her aware of how to control her opening. He showed her how the primary energy in her body had to flow a little more gently. It had been awakened so suddenly and now she had to slow it down, tune in her body more lovingly. She listened, watched him, and did what he said. She was too tired to complain. The voices were gone, and it felt nice to move her body into the poses. His face, before so mild, was now serious and his hands that had wanted to touch her had turned into hands that corrected, supported, and guided.

Ea and Mihai had done similar yoga postures along with their meditations, when she was a kid. She remembered being in their big house with the many strange and intoxicating smells. They lived on the southern side of the mountains. Mia and Sera used to come there regularly, before her father died. When her mother forgot to keep a steady eye of her whereabouts, she would explore the house, open doors and peak in on the meditation sessions, which took place in the many rooms of her grandparents’ house. It was a busy house. Her grandparents had shared the house with many other people. Someone was always tending the garden, playing music or going about in the kitchen. It was a house where she could easily occupy her mind. There was always something to look at, something always happened. Sera had liked it. Here she could finally escape the chores of the world with her mother.

“Will you stay the night, Sera?” he asked afterwards.

He had made some sketches of the positions for her. She was staring at them.

“The sun rises so beautifully in my room,” he said and pointed to the bedroom.

“And I want to make love to you,” he uttered quietly and smiled, as if it was the most natural thing to say. He reached out his arms.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “I have to go, don’t be angry with me, but I have to go,” she stumbled into the corridor and started putting on her shoes.

He looked at her for a long time before he spoke.

“I’m not angry, why would I be? It’s very late, Sera. Do you want me to walk you home?” he asked, standing in the doorway, smiling to her.

“No, it’s okay. I don’t mind the darkness. It’s okay...”

“Can I call you?” he asked as she began to open the door in feverish haste.

He put his hand on her shoulder and she felt it again, something rustling under her skin. *His hand must be on fire*, she thought.

“Can I call you, Sera?” he asked again, and she nodded, meeting his eyes briefly before she slipped out of the door and down the stairs, one foot after another.

“Take care,” she heard him say.

“I’m sorry,” she said, but he was no longer within audibility. She moved quickly, feeling a rush of warm energy, as she began to sweat. *I love you*, she heard herself think.

IX. Writhing of the Serpent

Sera let the hot water run into the blue tub and watched it as it slowly filled up. The water looked reddish like lake-water where mud from the bottom had been stirred loose. She hadn't taken a shower for the past four days to save enough rations of water to use on the luxury of a bath. Still, she felt guilty. Selma would be furious if she found out. She loved hot baths. If Selma came home now, she would have to invite her to join her although there wasn't much space for two people in the tub.

She played with the surface of the expanding water, moving her hands back and forth. The water rapidly filled up her mind with images and thoughts. Once, a decade ago before the strict preservation regulations were put out and they still had cars in the Auckland area; before the transportation system had changed and the highways were completely replaced by railways all through most of Aotearoa, Michael had taken her out to the Kai Iwi Lakes, far from the city of Auckland. They had packed the car with a small tent, fishing rods, a gas burner stove, their wind surfers and enough food to last them over the weekend and had driven off. The lakes were fifty miles out of the city, in a secluded, preserved area with no towns nearby. They were surrounded by a slim bed of sand, hidden by a forest of Matai and Totara trees, Birch and Pine trees. Coming from the roads, there was no telling that three unspoiled, luscious lakes rested calmly in the middle of the green wilderness. They had bathed in and drunk from the clear lake water.

She got up and started undressing; first she took off her T-shirt, then her socks, her tights, and underwear. The tiled floor was cold, and shivers ran from her feet up to her naked nipples, which hardened and stuck out like red berries. The uncomfortable shivers curiously made her warm within, but she dared not look down at the fine curls twirling within a perfect triangle, where the warmth sprang from. She looked at herself in the mirror above the sink. At first she gazed with wonder, as if she was staring at a woman she had never seen before. The women in her family were all considered no matter their age, to have an alluring beauty; even she with her pale skin and reddish hair. She decisively investigated those blue eyes, dark brows, and stern lines of her face. For a moment, it was like looking into Ea's face, the face of a warrior; so unlike her own. Her nipples were still hard. She looked at them in the mirror, and began to caress them gently, moving her fingers slowly round in circles, barely touching, but just enough to feel the fine whiteness of her skin. The warmth just below her stomach tickled her like her fingertips. A silent fire burned inside of her. She reached down and turned off the water.

On their second night at the lakes, they had gone for a walk down to the water in the blackness of the night. Once they emerged from the enclosure of the trees and came to the bed of the lake, the waxing moon blooming like a flower lit up the landscape with a silvery light. On the cool sand they undressed each other slowly in silence. Their gaze bound on each other.

She looked at the water, staring intently as if searching for an image. Her own was blurred in the murky water. She let two drops of purifier fall in and the murkiness slowly dissolved. She still couldn't see much except from the blue enamel of the tub. Then she put in Selma's grapefruit and almond oil and instantly little oil clouds formed and broke on the surface. The water felt burning hot on her cold foot, and sent jets of shivers up her back.

The water felt soft and heavy when they moved through it, hand in hand. It quickly became deep and despite the sudden coolness on their warm bodies, they didn't utter a sound. Soon they swam around in circles and dove down into the dark water. Like fish they intuitively moved through the fluid element. Under its surface they found each other's naked skin, which had a strangely smooth and slippery feel to it. They touched with passion. It was as though the water wasn't just surrounding them. It was in them, filling every pore and cell. Reaching the surface again, they swam to where they could stand on the bottom and kissed every bit of skin they could reach. There in the silvery gleams, the water was suddenly warm, and the heat in their body had increased immensely.

She let her whole body sink into the scented water and instantly her body limbs calmed down. She let her face be covered too, and tried to imagine herself floating and diving. Only her long legs and feet stuck out to the sides. The water began to envelop her and fill her up until she was pure fluid. United and yet dispersed like water. When she sat up to breathe, she noticed her right fingers were playing with her red pubic hairs, which floated in the water like seaweed.

When they came to the shallow water, they embraced as they lay flat on the soft lakebed mud. They couldn't stop touching, and they went deeper and deeper into one another's skin like water seeping through earth. Like a fire they continued relentlessly, not feeling the coolness of the air and water on their bodies. They became everything, their lovemaking uniting the world around and in them.

She let out a gasp and stretched her body the best she could. She felt warm in her face and her throat was buzzing again. She touched it gently, afraid that she might get burned. *It's like his hands*, she thought. It had been a week and they hadn't spoken. She touched her wet hair; under the water it was soft and smooth, but the moment it came out of it into the air, its texture and feel turned rougher and heavier.

A noise entered her thoughts and body, and she knew she had drifted off. She reached for the bathroom phone with her hand.

"Hello."

"Hi Sera."

"Doru!" her other hand came out of the water and she sat up.

“What are you doing?”

“Taking a bath,” she said guiltily as if he was sitting in front of her.

“Sounds wonderful. Would you like some company?” he asked teasingly, and she was sure he smiled on the other end of the receiver.

“No, thank you. I mean not right now, maybe a little later. I need to put some clothes....”

He started laughing in the other end.

“What?”

“Sera, I wanted to see you before you get to that point. Anyhow, I’d like to see you either way. I’ve been dreaming about you.”

She pulled the plug out and watched all of the precious water slowly seep away, while it gasped its final breath. *I’ve been dreaming about you*, she heard him say in her mind.

o o o o o

They woke early before the automated lights, which simulated the comings and goings of the sun, went on. His place was quiet, still embraced by a complete darkness apart from the dim night-lights, which illuminated a small path going to the bathroom. Matthew moved his hands down her naked skin, one tip at a time, slowly, gently like a kind breeze brushing her. He started at her neck and ears, then moved down to her breast and further to her stomach. His fingertips were soft, and the more they touched her, the warmer they became, and a fire grew in them and inside of her. Soledad was all still, waiting while he caressed her. Only her breath revealed the fire burning in her. She wanted to touch him, take him in, and the anticipation drew her crazy, melted her, and softened everything inside her. He knew how to excite her so well, from the very beginning. When she thought she could no longer hold it, he touched her with his whole body and they united in desire and love. They fell asleep again in each other’s embrace, quietly. Both full of vibration and nourishment to the spirit.

His arms were still wrapped around her when she woke again. She breathed in the smells of his soft cinnamon skin. *Thank you God*, she thought. *For bringing me light*. She hadn’t told him much about spiritual lovemaking. There had been no need, they merged as if they had always been together, and the energy moved so easily between them, as she helped him transmute it upwards. She had a good intuition about the male sexuality, and knew what to do when. It was a gift that most men liked. They loved the attention and guidance she would give them. With Matthew though, it was the first time she had experienced such ease. They fitted well as lovers. And they had only seen each other for over a week now, but there had been no hesitation between them. He had with little reluctance accepted that she might be with other lovers. She sensed that he understood what she was about. In any case, she knew they would

learn from each other. They could bring each other transformation, help each other rediscover their true nature, their connection with the Divine.

After their early morning amorousness, there was still a fire burning inside of her, expanding her mind and body, and centering her to realize the force she carried within. He was still sound asleep, his breathing deep. His face was calm as a child's. She couldn't wait to see Doru and tell him about Matthew. She hadn't seen Doru for weeks. He rarely came to the center. However, now that he had started teaching and hanging out with the little boy Hans, it almost felt like he had come back. Doru was on everybody's lips again. She sensed something had changed in his life. Doru had never before paid much attention to children, not even in his teaching. The uncertainty, not the endless possibilities, made a fire of desire flare up in her.

So-hum, she sang, *let in love and light. There's no need*, she thought correcting herself and stroked Matthew's face. *Love and light are everywhere, manifested in every being.*

She gently tore herself away from his arms and stepped out on the cold floor and stretched her body. His bed was planted on a raised platform at one end of the huge loft apartment. If there had been rays of the sun coming through the high windows into the space, and not the simulated lights, she would never want to leave the apartment. She could do her practice in the other end of the apartment undisturbed while Matthew could go about his business, whatever that may be.

She walked over the huge living area floor, passed the sofa, the coffee table, and the big television and computer screen. Half way to the kitchen, she made a few pirouettes like a ballerina. She stopped and stretched her body again, reaching out for the cosmic energy, trying to fill herself up with it. There was a bubble of giddiness moving upwards in her body. She felt like laughing, but instead she danced a little more. As she turned and looked behind her, she noticed that he was watching her silently from the bed.

"Don't stop. You're so beautiful!"

"Why aren't you smiling then?" she asked and looked at his grave face, and was saddened by his solemn eyes.

"I am. I am. I just don't smile much on the outside."

"Smiles are here to be shared, my love. Don't you think? Would you like some water? I'm getting some."

He nodded absentmindedly, and she wondered if he sometimes didn't listen to her.

"Why all this space?" Soledad asked, as she walked further down toward the open kitchen in the other end.

He didn't answer, so she opened the cupboard in search for a glass. They were full of food and utilities, untouched though, as if somebody was stacking and organizing them for him in case of a major catastrophe. She finally found two glasses and filled them up with water from a huge container on the kitchen table. He seemed well supplied with both electricity and water.

She walked back to the bed where he sat naked with blank eyes and transparent skin. When she reached full view of him, he spoke slowly and softly; the closer she got to him the more joyful his energy became. She felt an urge to touch him right in the middle of his chest.

“There is more space to breathe here. That’s why,” he said and folded his arms in front of his chest to prevent her from running her fingers down the center of it.

She suspected that he wasn’t joking. Anyone, who had the money to live here, could be anywhere they wished. He could easily go some place where he could breathe, unless it wasn’t his money or an open sky wasn’t enough. She swallowed a lump. She easily accepted the way life presented itself to her, maybe she would have to keep her eyes and ears more open this time. She still didn’t know anything about him other than he longed for peace and love. Whatever made him sick could be healed with lovemaking and yoga. She had faith that she had met him for a reason, there was something they were here to give each other. Nothing happened without a reason.

She gave him the glass and watched him drink it with eagerness while he closed his eyes. She watched the water as it glided impatiently down his throat. *Heavenly mother, I offer you the fruits of my activities. I take this water with gratefulness, blessed be!* she sang in her mind and tasted the precious water as it filled her dry mouth. Then Matthew started coughing violently. She put down the glass and she went up to him. She took his upper body and pushed it forward and patted his back, first hard then more gently. He calmed down.

“Oh, that was a bad one. You should take better care of yourself,” she said and smiled. He looked at her with soft eyes, and she kissed his lips. *I love you*, she thought with tenderness.

“You have to get away from this city. Get out under the sky and sun. Nobody can live here for long with great health.”

“You seem to.”

“Yes, and it must be a miracle. With you, on the other hand, I’m not sure the yoga will have fast enough results. It will take a long time for you to receive the full benefits. You need to do many hours of it every day. Can’t you take off?”

“No, I am stuck here,” he answered solemnly.

“You always have options, if you open up to the Universe,” she said and smiled.

She didn’t want to sound patronizing. She knew it was true, but like anything else only if one believed it was so.

“I don’t have the option, believe me. Besides, where would I go and what for? Would I go to Chiclayo to climb the mountains?”

Now, his voice sounded patronizing.

Soledad looked at him with dread. *He knows a lot about me*, she realized. She let go of him and stared wildly at him.

“You...You...,” she faltered angrily.

His eyes showed fear now. Don’t leave me, they said.

“Soledad, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it would upset you.”

“How do you know about that? I wasn’t even born in Chiclayo.”

“I just have access to this kind of information,” he replied and shrugged his shoulders.

“That’s not good enough! I have a right to know why and where you get the information about me from! It’s personal, until I choose to share it with you. You have no reason to mistrust me!”

Matthew was silent for a long time, holding back. She sensed it really wasn’t about her, or about mistrust. It felt like fear, the primal of them all.

“I learned through my father. He’s influential. I’m sorry. I don’t distrust you, Soledad.”

“Don’t think you know everything about me, just because you can go into a computer somewhere and check my life files. You can never know my soul like that, no matter how far you dig, Mr. Ferguson,” she said harshly and let out a big gasp of air.

She was angry and frightened. And now the deep, high ceilings didn’t seem to provide enough air or space anymore. She felt them pressing on her head, weighing heavily on her body. She needed to get out, away from his hands, before so gentle and kind, now unable to stop touching her with haste and lust. She tore herself away from his embrace.

“I have to go now. I need some space,” she whispered and he let go fearfully, as if he would never see her again.

She took her clothes and started dressing. His eyes were silently glued to her. She wanted to go to the center and join a class. Maybe Doru would take her to the Grounds one of these days, she was aching for the blue of the sky. When she was ready to leave, she took his hands, which still felt energetic to her touch. She was no longer angry with him, she had let go of the anger, knowing it had had its effect and the moment had moved on.

“I love you, Soledad. Ever since the first day I saw you,” he said quietly.

Then smile, my love. Smile to the Divine love that has awakened in us, she thought and smiled warmly to him.

“I feel it. You’re in my heart, Matthew. You bring me joy. Keep focusing on that and you’ll find joy.”

o o o o o

“It’s good to see you,” Doru said and kissed her in the doorway.

The apartment was cold. With much toil, she had pushed one of the windows a little open, so that the fresh winds could slip in. His warm skin against hers gave her instant warmth and gratification. He looked at her, his eyes two burning suns in a night sky, penetrating her softly.

“How have you been?” he asked.

Sera nodded.

“Is the yoga helping?”

She nodded again.

They walked to her bedroom and sat down on the edge of her bed. He took her hands and closed his eyes. She looked at him. They sat like that for a while and even with her eyes open, she heard them again. A flaming choir of voices, which made no sense, only filled her with many strong emotions.

<es war alles sie brauchte um sich zu erklaren
il a coupe ma gorge
traveled to another dimension
luften lugter af jord og jeg indander den
meinen Koerper geschmeidig und lebendig machen
here everything is life and consciousness
min krop er glat, den smager af salt
e le fiamme chi le spegnera?
the essential stuff which we are made of
ils ne pouvais pas etre dupe, tudtak az utat
me recuerdo como el agua envuelve mi cuerpo>

He opened his eyes and took her in his arms. She opened hers and felt his warm embrace and kisses. It felt like letting go, giving in to something greater than herself. It felt like dreaming. He kissed her lips, her neck, her ears and her stomach.

“Do you want me?” he whispered.

She nodded and felt warmth and wetness overwhelming her senses. Then he slowed down and they looked at each other again.

“Are you ready?” he asked, as he sobered.

“I think so,” she replied. “I haven’t done this for so long.”

“You’re so beautiful,” he said and took off her shirt, exposing her shoulders, breast and stomach. He let his fingers follow her curves all the way down to her wetness.

“This is your ‘yoni’, a very sacred place,” he said quietly, running his finger lightly over it, as he loosened her pants.

“It’s very beautiful,” he said when he had removed her layers of clothing.

He moved slowly, touching her gently. Anticipation gnawed in her bones, but she couldn’t move a muscle or speak. She just wanted him to go further.

Then their front door was opened, and they could hear Selma rummaging in the apartment. Sera

closed her eyes and tried to focus on him, his hand and lips, the sudden rush of warmth she had felt in the hallway, but the images of Selma interfered.

“Sera! Are you home? Sera!” Selma suddenly exclaimed.

Sera sat up on the bed and put on her clothes in haste.

“Yes, I’m here with Doru,” she answered.

“Come and meet Selma,” she spoke softly to him and took his hand.

The excitement had gone away, and she wondered what he felt. She had not touched him at all. She didn’t know if she wanted to. Selma first looked a little offensive, her eyebrows raised and her hands resting on her sharp hips.

“So you’re Doru!” she said and smirked.

“Hello. How are you?” he said.

“Where are you from?”

“From Inwood,” he answered softly and held her hand for a while as he looked into her eyes.

“No, I mean you look different. Are you a newcomer?”

“Many years ago, I traveled here from Romania.”

“That’s a long trip.”

“Yes, I was only 15 then.”

Sera studied their long exchange of gazes with a sting of hurt. In a matter of seconds, Selma had dropped her arms and eyebrows, and relaxed with Doru. *How does he do it?* Sera thought.

“So what are you guys doing today?” Selma asked.

“I don’t know,” Sera answered and cast a sidelong glance at Doru.

“I thought I’d take you to another special place, downtown.”

“Great,” Sera said excitedly, hoping that they would get out of the Underground. Before they left, she noticed Selma’s eyes, they were stuck on Doru.

Sera had a feeling of where he was taking her when he told her that they weren’t going to the Grounds and that he wanted to take her to a place where he taught. There was nothing that could surprise her now, she sensed. The narrow, endless street tunnels of the Underground only seemed to bring her further and deeper into a strange, intricate world. Like an insect caught in a spider’s web, she tried to move without luck. She could only watch the mysterious danger like the darkness in her childhood, which was waiting for her with lightless, nameless eyes.

She was there again. The woman George had introduced her to, who had made her a salad and spoken of her home. She knew Doru. They gave each other a long hug and a kiss.

“I’m so glad to see you. I wanted to talk to you,” she looked up and noticed Sera.

“Hi Sera. Good to see you again. I didn’t know you two knew each other.”

“We met on the trains. We both live up in Inwood,” Doru answered and smiled tenderly to Sera.

“You look very happy, Doru. I knew you were up to something,” Soledad said and laughed a little.

Then she squinted and observed them both as if from a distance.

“It’s really nice to see you again, Sera. I was thinking about you. Maybe you would like to join my class or any class here at the center. I forgot to ask you last time we met.”

Sera shrugged her shoulders and felt a little bewildered by Soledad’s bursts of smiles and words. Then she gave Sera a long hug too and Sera felt warm and light.

< In some land not so far away you grew up. here the soil is covered with grass and plants, clouds and rays of sun powder the sky, birds fly freely, and the only rooftops are those of the small brick or wooden village houses on the mountain sides. i long to see this sun play and dance in your dark, sleepy eyes >

“I gotta go now. If you want some privacy, the blue room is available. George is busy right now, if you wanted to see him,” Soledad said.

By the sudden sound of Soledad’s voice, Sera was woken as if from a long dream. She was unsure of how much time had passed and where she had been. It felt like dreaming, but she was sure of the voice, it wasn’t unfamiliar. She had not been afraid of the voice, but now she felt a little out of place. Homesick.

When they entered the blue room, hand in hand, she felt good about where she was again. His hands made her feel safe. The room lived up to its name. Not only the walls and ceilings vibrated from a light blue paint, but also the floor carpet, the altar and lamps in the room were blue. Doru walked over to a small CD player and sat for a while looking at the CD’s.

Sera sat down on the floor and pulled her knees to her chest. The music was soft and airy. It calmed her down. Everything was happening at once as if a deadline made her life urgent. She had to make decisions of people and what she wanted to do. Her life wasn’t just a matter of deciding on a topic, reading the books, doing the research, and acquiring the exact knowledge anymore. Following the rules of others. Now, she had to deal with all these people, why they were here, what she was doing. At home, she remembered, her books lay untouched. They were the reason why she was here. *I must get back to where I was*, she thought. *That is the real urgency, not this.*

He sat down opposite her and took her hands gently off her knees. Then he pulled her closer and closer to his chest until they embraced. She closed her eyes so that she didn’t have to see. Her vision distracted her, made her think and analyze. She just wanted to feel. They sat there for a while, breaths and skin touched. Then he started undressing her, kissing her skin. The music intensified with the beats of her heart and the rhythm of her breathing. His touches became stronger and her hands started playing with his naked skin, so unfamiliar to her touch and yet so light and inviting. She felt the blood rushing, the

breath of life streaming through those limbs. She felt a force going through her, when he touched her yoni.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered. “I love you.”

She opened her eyes slowly, remembering the danger, the dark.

“We need some protection,” Sera said and looked at her hands when she spoke. She felt awkward. It was as though she had spoiled the magic.

“Against pregnancy?” he asked while he touched her face.

She nodded.

“I have many years of practice in how not to ejaculate. It is part of my practice. No semen will touch you, I promise you. And I have regular check-ups done,” he said with a smile.

Sera looked at him for a long time, not understanding completely.

“You must feel in your heart what is right for you to do.”

Feel in my heart, she thought and felt her throat vibrating. *But I have no heart*, she thought dismayed. But when he touched her there in the sacred place, she opened herself up like a blossoming flower fearlessly of what may come and moved her hands to his erection that lay between his crossed legs. She stared at it as if it wasn’t his, but some outside element that had imposed its presence on their amatory union.

When she closed her eyes again, he was inside her, and she felt soft and moist as clouds. They moved together. Her body was light and energetic, rustling from the movements.

Who am I? she thought.

“Talk to me, my love,” he whispered. “I want to hear your sweet voice.”

His words were soft and entered her like music.

“Music, it’s like music,” she said. “Sweet, innocent music,” she mumbled.

There were voices inside of him, she could feel them coming to her body. She breathed slowly, feeling the light and his body entering hers. She didn’t need to speak, but she did, because he wanted to hear her voice. She wanted to make it heard, stifle the other voices.

“Doru, my love...,” she whispered and felt his reactions.

They moved around for a while, feeling each other’s bodies. She could not believe she had nothing to worry about, but he was quiet, smiling while he moved for her, danced to the sweet music he made her hear.

When she looked at his vibrating face again, she saw something beyond the tip of his head. It looked like the silhouette of a man-like face with braids and kind, immense eyes. It was so reachable, but she couldn’t move toward it.

“Doru,” she whispered again and laughed.

She wasn’t sure whom she was talking to. Him or the being next to him. *I’m light*, she thought and

laughed again. They moved and moved endlessly, lifting themselves higher and higher into the blueness of the walls and ceilings. *Focus on your heart*, she thought while she felt an invigorate stream of energy rushing through. Small electrical currents of vibrations filled her again and again with the strange sensation of completion.

I move swiftly through the web of dark corridors. I only see ahead, looking for the Grounds. This time I am not going to stop. I want to run to the end, no matter the pain. I turn and twist. I am as flexible as a snake. I move with the speed and lightness of a bird on flight. I have the power of a steppe fire, my flames clearing miles of land. I only hear the sounds of my heartbeat and my heavy respiration. Beads of perspiration cover my body and still I am on fire. I feel free. The world is mine and I am part of it. There is a way to be happy and free, even if these walls and this vessel bind me.

I've come to the open fields where the sky is glowing blue. As if surrounded by ocean water, I swim into the mosaic meadows of grass, harebells, rush lilies, cornflowers, daisies, dandelions, silver kings, dahlias, and foxgloves, and as I look back I can clearly see the winding path I have taken through the field. It twists and turns itself like a snake.

When I can't run anymore, when I can't feel the rush of wind and sun in my face and hair, when I stop, I know I will be back in the dark catacombs with the solemn, weeping walls. The blissful buzzing of joy inside of me will decline, run out, and the pain will become unbearable. But the fear of the walls enclosing me, digging into me wet and sad, makes me keep running, and I run while you hold onto me, following me.