

# Part 4

*Now join your hands and with your hands your hearts.*

*William Shakespeare*

# X

Sera stared at the white ceilings; in one place her eyes lingered on the peeling paint where the surface to a hidden place was cracking and revealing itself to her. She had been unable to sleep properly, haunted by uncanny creatures and had woken up with a sense of emptiness in her body. The comfortable covers forced her to stay where she lay on the bed. Even if she had wanted, her limbs were unwilling to move. She longed for the sweet dreams of him, but none had come. The emptiness revealed its face to her. It was long and white like sheets upon sheets. What was the meaning of all that which happened in her life? Even if he didn't come to her dreams, he was there already, still running through the fields with her.

She moved her body an inch, then another. On the night table the book he had lent her waited for her. Was she ready to read about the mystical thoughts of enlightened men, passed on from one generation to another. In spite of the passings of time, those ideas had survived many centuries, many wars and that alone thrilled her. Was meaning to be found there?

She glanced at it for a while, imagining that she could move it by the mere thought. On overcast days, when she was a kid and missed the sun, she used to imagine that she could move the clouds. She would blow and blow in her mind, imagining she was the wind and could push them away, out of the sky. The book didn't move. Clouds were easier to move. She focused harder with all the force of her mind but still nothing happened. What did that prove to her? Magic didn't exist. Why then did she still try? Why could she still feel him inside of her, a tinkling sensation that made her float in the air? It was she who was being pushed, ever so gently into the air.

She had woken early because she hadn't needed more sleep. He lifted her up with the force of his energy, removed her fears and tensions. And they had danced together. Danced to the music of the air and the beating of their hearts.

"Sera! Are you up?" Selma asked from the other side of her closed door.

After a moment of silence, she found the energy to speak.

“No!” she replied.

Selma suddenly opened the door without hesitation and walked in.

“It’s Sunday, you know! We can’t lie around all day. I want to do something. Let’s go see what they’re showing at the screens or we could check out a cafe!”

Selma looked bright and energetic. She was smiling and looked at Sera with huge, round eyes.

“Maybe later,” Sera answered and moved over to her side, facing the wall.

“It’s three. You always sit at the window by now. Where’s the stuff about life you always ramble about? Why this? Not today! You can’t be like this today! Give me a break,” Selma walked restlessly back and forth.

Sera could hear her feet touching the floor.

“Are you happy?” Sera asked as she turned over and sat up in the bed.

“Yeah. I want to enjoy myself today. You have any good suggestions?” Selma asked, went to the bed and pulled off the covers.

“It’s time to get up, lazy butt!” Selma started tickling Sera on the stomach.

She knew her sensitive spots. Sera laughed painfully hard.

“Where’s your spirit, girl! You should be studying now like a good girl, instead you’re loitering!”

“Okay, just stop!” Sera giggled and after a short pause. “Do you really feel adventurous? You know, Doru took me to this place. I never told you about it.”

She looked at Selma who seemed a little interested.

“It’s above the Underground. It’s very beautiful.”

Sera still looked closely at Selma for raised eyebrows or what was worse. Selma still laughed a little, but nodded.

“Take me away, girl!” she sang. “I’ll follow you, wherever you go. As long as you stop being grumpy.”

They walked to the trains, through the tunnels, hand in hand. Sera felt happy again, it almost felt like being with Doru. She would call him. Maybe he would want to see her again. Selma was rarely so merry and giddy. It was pleasant to be together, just the two of them.

“Where’s Frank today?” Sera asked.

“He’s home working. He doesn’t know what he is missing out on!” Selma said and smiled.

“No, he doesn’t,” Sera agreed and wondered for a moment, if Selma was aware of where they were going.

They reached the turnstiles and walked through onto the platforms. When they came to the closed up exit, Sera noticed that somebody had removed the sign and instead of the rusty iron door, a grate barred the entrance to the Grounds. Before giving up, her eyes searched for other solutions and

then she spotted the door, just open enough not to be closed.

“Where are we going?” Selma asked. Her face was one dreamy smile. More distant than stars.

Sera thought for a minute that she should let it be. Could she go where Doru went so easily? The desire to feel free grew in her everyday like a ball of fire in her chest. It would be easy like gliding through water or letting the wind fill your sail and carry your board over the vast blue element. She just wanted to have a peek, feel the sun and wind, feel if it snowed or rained. *Without risking something we will never live*, she thought. *Maybe he’s right, we have to take the jump, conquer that something inside of us.*

“Ready to let go of everything?” Sera asked and glanced at Selma, who had noticed the door.

Like a soft summer breeze their giggles filled the space and so they entered. There was a long corridor with doors on either side. Sera, taking the lead, steered toward the end of it where she could see it ended in a crossing path going to either side. They hadn’t let go of each other’s hands. She noticed a cold draft coming through. She followed the coldness, which had to come from an opening somewhere. The place looked deserted. Some of the doors in the corridor were open, some closed. They led into small, empty cement cubicles. When they reached the end of the corridor they turned right into the first space she had seen with Doru. It looked just the same, like an abandoned catacomb after a turbulent war.

<in the deepest of subterranean caves a secret lies buried. the door is always open for those who dare go into the dark, and beyond it, the hissing snakes will call out my name>

Sera felt a sudden shiver run through her. The heavy door was wide open, someone had put a big rock to prevent it from closing. She glanced at Selma who had been quiet for a while. She looked uneasy now, staring at the chaotic landscape of rocks and debris.

“We’re almost there,” Sera whispered and squeezed Selma’s hand. *I’m not afraid*, Sera told herself. *Not anymore. I’m journeying.*

They walked through the doorway and came to the stairway. Sera let go of Selma’s hand. They were almost there.

“Wait here! I am just going to get something,” Sera said and walked up the stairs.

The light hit her like a tidal wave with an overpowering force. It seemed it came from everywhere bouncing off the concrete and the buildings. After a while her eyes adjusted and she looked at the place. It looked like the first time, plants and the ruins of a great city all intermingled. The sky was vast, throwing its covers high above her eyes. She spotted the park. There were more

leaves on the ground. She couldn't find the masks anywhere and assumed that Doru had taken them. She walked back down the stairs, wondering again if perhaps they should just go back home.

Selma wasn't waiting for her at the end of the stairs so she called out for her.

"Yeah, I'm coming," she heard Selma say and came through the open door.

"It's okay, Doru brought me here once. I was fine. We'll just go for five minutes," Sera said as she walked further down the stairs and could see her standing among the bricks, rocks and dirt.

"You sure?" Selma asked and looked scared.

"Yes. Come!"

Selma followed her slowly up the steps. They emerged together.

"Doru brought me here a couple of weeks ago and I am fine," Sera said and was interrupted by a sudden cry from Selma, whether from joy or pain Sera couldn't determine.

Sera looked back. Selma stood in a shower of sunlight.

"We are doomed!" she cried out and went to her knees.

Sera quickly took her face in her hands and looked into Selma's blue eyes. Her pupils had shrunk a little, but were still fairly big, even in the bright light. Sera came very close to her and noticed the dark circles under her eyes, which had been hidden by layers of makeup. Her skin looked so old and worn. The facial contours of fine, dried out lines glittered in the sunlight.

"Selma, look at me! You'll be all right. The air is fine. You won't believe it, but it's beautiful, no people, no noise, no heat!" Selma breathed heavily and looked at Sera as if she was looking at a ghost. "The Ustodians have been lying...."

"Shut up!" Selma interrupted. "I don't want to hear anything. Show me this damn place," Selma got up again. "And then let's get out of here. My head is so heavy. The light is so strong, it feels like my eyes are bleeding!" she said and rubbed her eyes.

"The sun will be good for you, your skin...." Sera paused and started walking.

She was suddenly worried about Selma. She thought she heard a vague voice coming from Selma, a voice, which had been suppressed for a long time, but Sera couldn't face it. It seemed too overwhelming, so she breathed in the air to fill up the spaces the voice could inhabit like Doru had taught her.

Selma stayed near the staircase. She held her hands on the railing of the entrance to the Underground to support her body as if some invisible forces were pulling in her. Sera could make out a faint smile on Selma's lips. It was always hard to tell Selma's mood.

"You're a dreamer, Sera. You must be made of something else than the rest of us. What are you trying to prove?" Selma exclaimed and smiled, still holding firmly onto the railing. "I don't give a shit if the air is breathable. I almost hope it isn't!"

She laughed so hard that her eyes filled with tears.

“This world is so unreal!”

“I know what you mean,” Sera replied. “But when you catch one of those rare moments, just before everything changes, you have not lived in vain.”

Sera spread her arms, unfolded them like wings and ran down the crooked, broken up concrete, twisting her moving body in between plants and cracks like a snake. She heard Selma’s laughter behind her but in front of her she sensed something. Her throat was buzzing alarmingly and in that instant she stopped and looked ahead. Two human-like figures moved around with strange looking instruments, one heavier than the other. Their outfits looked like space suits and they moved awkwardly as if there was, in fact, no gravity preventing them from falling away into the sky.

*They haven’t seen me*, Sera thought, her heart galloping in her chest. She moved backwards, first slowly. Then she saw them stop and look up. *They have seen me*. Sera panicked, turned around and ran back to Selma, who was still giggling at the staircase.

“What’s wrong?” she cried out the minute she saw the look on Sera’s face.

“Let’s just get out of here!” Sera said.

“Not so fast, ladies,” a voice yelled about five feet behind them. One of the men had jumped on a small, silvery electrically driven vehicle and followed Sera. The other man caught up by foot. The two girls froze. The head masks they were wearing made it impossible to get a clear idea of their faces. They spoke through small microphones and their voices sounded like train announcements. Their yellow outfits shone in the sunlight.

“What are you doing here? Don’t you realize the hazards? It’s against the regulations?” the man on the vehicle said, as he jumped off and approached them.

“Then what are you doing here?” Selma exclaimed.

Sera just stared blankly at the two men, unable to respond.

“We have been sent by the Ustodians. We are doing inspections and upgrading the systems here,” the same man replied.

“Ladies! I think we will have to report you. You have gone way out of your jurisdiction. For your own safety’s sake, I advice you not to do anything irrational,” said the other man and grabbed Selma’s hands.

“Unfortunately, we have a lot of work to do here before we can drop you off, so you’ll have to wait,” the man continued and told the other man to get hold of Sera.

“Please, don’t report us!” Selma yelled and tried to resist his firm hold of her arms, but to no avail.

Sera didn’t resist, just looked at the man in horror, still attempting to grasp the seriousness of the situation. They had been caught.

“We just wanted to take a breath of fresh air. We haven’t done anything,” Sera finally muttered.

“Well, you know that it is against the regulations. Why Ma’am do you think we are dressed up in these suits?” the aggressive man said.

Both men shepherded them down the stairs. The first remark made Selma laugh spitefully.

“Yes, why are you wearing those pathetic suits. We haven’t died and gone to heaven? How come Mr. Space man?”

The man who held her started to firm his grip and got one arm free to hit her with, but the heavy outfit slowed him down considerably, and it became a comical gesture rather than a threatening pose.

“Junkies!”

“William, don’t. Let’s just tie them up and get the last research done. They’re just a couple of schoolgirls. They don’t know anything. Let the Ustodians decide what to do with them.”

“But it would be so easy to dump them up there somewhere,” William said and after that no one said anything.

The two men put them in one of the cubicles where they spent an hour in stony silence, tied up to one another. Selma didn’t move a muscle and her anger hit Sera like icy water. After several attempts to get Selma’s attention, Sera froze too, scared of causing more damage.

They put them, along with all their instruments, in the back of the small vehicle which was almost entirely made of a transparent material. They had to squeeze themselves down on the back seats, but they had a perfect rearview of the strange city landscape they drove through. Sera could get the best and most comfortable look if she turned her face to the right. That way she also avoided looking at Selma, whose tense presence crushed her. It was a long ride, which went through the northwestern parts of the city down to the midtown area. Sera noticed how the buildings differed in size and material. Some areas were nicer than others. It was clear to see which buildings were still in use, and hadn’t collapsed because of neglect. The further they came to midtown the more buildings looked maintained and inhabited. Also the streets were smoother, less plants had penetrated the concrete. After a long time of silence between the four people, Sera finally found some courage.

“Where are you taking us?”

“To the Grand Central headquarters,” the friendlier of the two replied.

The comment made Selma look up. Her face was like a closed fist. She had been staring out of the window all the time.

“We are taking you to a place where we put people like you,” William, the aggressive one said scornfully.

“William, just leave them, will you?”

“I don’t like it man, I have enough people checking when I go to the fucking bathroom and

what comes out of me,” William said in a softer voice.

“This has nothing to do with us. Take it easy,” the other man said.

“Well, it ain’t happened before. Perhaps it will make them think twice about sending me out. I want to get out of here. Go to some place pretty,” William said. “I know it is different for you. I know we are well set here. We get to do our research and explore new avenues. But where are the credits, the fun, where is the beach and the real energy?”

Sera thought about Aotearoa, the beaches there, and her wind surfer. She couldn’t imagine anyone from this world going there. They had opened the borders for most immigrants or refugees after the Final War, but they had tried to control the waves of people coming in, so that there wouldn’t be a large number of newcomers taking over whole areas at once. They knew that it would take time for people to adapt and they wanted to maintain their stable, clean environment. Their integrity. In some ways, Aotearoa was similar to this world, only people lived outside, grew their vegetables in their gardens and their children played outside and lived with their families, not in some faraway institution.

o o o o

“Hi, my love,” he said and felt his heart bounce.

*I’m tuned into her ways of looking at the world,* he thought and smiled.

He gave Soledad a kiss and a big, warm hug. His hands and arms felt as broad and charged as the branches of a long-lived, vigorous tree, capable of embracing the whole world. He looked at Soledad for a long time, going deeper into her vibrant eyes, and he saw one of the many faces of the Goddess.

When George had introduced him to Soledad, he worked at the center almost every day. She had arrived from Florida with a small suitcase, a backpack and \$200 in a hand-made purse, which she wore around her neck. She worked as a waitress in the daytime and early in the morning as a cleaning lady. She had met one of the students from the center and had joined them. She became part of the MOSA people, welcomed with an immediate openness. She had a gift of love. Nobody ever felt left out or unloved in her company. He had loved her from the first moment he saw her, and it was a familiar love. He still felt that same warm kindness from her, which he had admired in her when he first met her; now it was only more vibrant. And she carried herself like the Divine that was in her. He realized how connected Sera and Soledad could be one day. And for a second he felt superfluous. They had similar gifts, only Sera wasn't fully aware yet. But she would be one day, linking the worlds together, and then perhaps she would move on. Further on. Sera had so quickly opened up that first time they had made love. He could bring out the great potential in her, and she would blossom.

"I'm glad you could come. I just finished my meditation. A cup of tea?" Doru's word came out like little sparks in an engine.

Soledad looked at him with curiosity and smiled.

"What's gotten into you?"

He laughed a little, but didn't say anything. She took off her shoes and they walked into the living room. There were candles burning even though it was still light outside. Soledad ran to one of the windows and looked out. She could see most of the upper part of Manhattan city. It was as though everything stood still outside. Nothing moved, just straight, square buildings waiting in lines. Frozen. If they had had ears they would be listening for the coming of a new moment, a new age.

In places, she spotted collapsed buildings from the weight of twenty some years of neglect. The city had put itself in ruins. The brutality of the Final War had only left one mark on America. Corpses. The Anthrax spores were not visible to the eye and couldn't destroy buildings or whole cities like the nuclear bombs that had been ignited in the Middle East and Asia, but they were carried by air and wind to respiratory systems, forcing all life out of any beings that came in contact with the spores. Though it seemed so, the air outside wasn't frozen any longer, they could enter these unfamiliar grounds, rebuild what had once been or could be. But would the world be much better off if the Grounds were really to open again? Would people make the same mistakes all over, until the wheels of life had to make its adjustments again?

"I miss the sky so much. When are you going to take me out under it again?" she asked and sighed as she turned her head.

"One of my contacts told me that the researchers have started to examine this area, so I doubt it will be very safe. We have to wait," Doru said.

"I have something to look forward to I hope..." she said and smiled.

"I have a feeling that it'll happen much sooner than we think."

"Good," she said. "What about that tea? And I want to hear about when you fell in love. Is it Sera?"

They walked into the kitchen and sat down at the small table there. He still smiled as if Soledad had said something funny. He felt so happy, full of flowers and light. Sera had given him something but he couldn't tell what.

"She's very beautiful, quite a treasure," Soledad said.

"Mhm..." Doru answered.

"I have a feeling you're not going to tell me," Soledad said and grinned.

"I don't know what to tell you. Maybe I am in love. There's a feeling of innocence in me, which I don't know if I have felt before..." he paused, while he put water into the kettle.

"Some music?" he asked and walked into the living room.

Soon a pan flute and small bells seeped into the kitchen and Soledad pulled her legs up to her chest on the chair. She thought of the mountains where the village musicians played on special occasions, some times in the streets. She would go back if Matthew came with her. It would be like exploring new landscapes. That place was so vital that it could heal him from whatever was making him suffer.

"I've met someone too," she said and looked at Doru who had kneeled in front of her, beginning to massage the top of her feet.

"Does he bring you joy?" Doru asked softly.

"Yes," Soledad said and knew it was true. "But he is in a lot of pain."

Doru went quiet for a little while, closing his eyes and focusing in.

"Give any pain to the earth. She doesn't see it as pain. To her it is only energy. And don't forget to listen to your heart. You've always had such a big heart." Doru touched her forehead and ran his fingers over her face, making small, delicate circles.

He felt a deep tenderness and stayed there in the depth of her eyes for a long time. After a while of looking, he saw every woman he had ever loved in those frail lines of her face; united they formed the face of the Goddess, vibrant and ever-changing like the passing of the seasons, deep and dark like the corridors of the Underground, intoxicating and soft like the blossoming flowers of spring. When he saw Soledad's face again, there were tears in her eyes.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered into her hair and kissed her warm cheeks. Soon their arms and hands uncovered and discovered, joined and connected in warm, amorous openings and spaces.

*SHE is the key to all mysteries. SHE carries the serpent, the magic staff of the Universe in her outstretched arms and hands. It obeys only her. SHE can make it vibrant, or SHE can put it to sleep with a whisper, or a subtle gesture. SHE is the mother of all, to her birth and death are given. Her strong palpitating arms embrace the world with a wisdom and compassion only she owns.*

*HE, who seeks to conceive all mysteries, goes to her. His heart and body are trembling. SHE has aroused him, but HE knows he can't control the serpent without her. HE kneels in front of her feet and kisses them with tenderness. HE feels such respect and love for her. Woman to man. Man to woman. Such a unique ritual. Through her his path will be lit, through her HE will come to the core of the Universe, where everything there is and has been is revealed to him. SHE is the light, by which HE will be illuminated. SHE is the darkness, in which HE will shine.*

*HE sees her vividly, SHE is floating above him, at the same time in and outside of him. So SHE touches him, and sparks the life inside of him. HE opens her like a flower, petal by petal, while he stays in this moment of ecstatic union, and the vibrant serpent crawls further and further up until it lies as a crown of light above both of them. Shiva and Shakti.*

When they drew away from each other's loving fusion, the sun was setting slowly, quietly painting the sky in peach blossoms and lilacs. They lay down on his bed, bodies buzzing of life and light, hands entwined. Their two souls had reached a blissful state, together.

o o o o

They were led through a number of descending street tunnels. It felt like they were walking in spirals, downwards. A big heavy wooden door with huge metal rings as doorknobs guarded the Keeper's station. The two researchers led them through the door, into a large room with white and green painted walls, wide tidy desks, file cabinets on straight rows and attentive office staff in their neat uniforms waiting for them. Here they were handcuffed and put into the hands of two superiors. After scribbling down something in a big book, which was placed on the front table, the two researchers took off with a nod. It was then that Selma came out of her bubble.

"I haven't done anything wrong. It has to be a mistake, Mister." Her voice trembled a little, but didn't lack determination.

"Miss...", the Keeper looked in his book. "Miss Swenson, we have eye witnesses, special people working for the Ustodians, who saw you move into a danger zone, outside of your jurisdiction. We will have to keep you here in custody until we've examined the case. You and Miss...", he said slowly as if talking to a child, while he scanned his book again. "Miss Skau may be in danger for yourselves and society."

"Really?" Selma mumbled ironically.

She looked around at the few faces present; from one to another, as if she tried to see through the veils of a very realistic dream haunting her.

"You can't do this to us!" Selma's eyes flickered again; restlessly she began moving back and forth, shocked by realizing the dream wasn't a dream.

The handcuffs chimed with her movements. Sera stared at her fearfully, forgetting where she was, listening for the voice deep inside Selma. She feared for her friend without knowing why. Why didn't she fear for herself?

"Miss Swenson, I ask of you to behave and show respect to the authorities. Your case will be treated like all other cases."

Selma moved all the way up to the Keeper's face, so that she was almost touching him. They were breath to breath. Sera noticed that the Keeper's stoic face had remained unmoved by Selma's outbursts. His light brown eyes glittered slightly and remained focused, but not on anything particular as if they couldn't distinguish between dark and light.

"Please Mister!" Selma begged and looked at his name tag. "Mr. Coldburn, I beg you. Don't contact my father, Mr. Swenson," she put emphasis on the name. "I want to tell him myself," she added and smirked.

"Mr. Davidson put them in cell number fourteen. I will personally have a word with the research officers," he said and turned his face away from Selma.

The guard led the two girls down a corridor, by pushing them gently in front of him. Like cages, the small barred cells on either side of the corridor protected the outside world from their occupants. In each cell one or two people sat drowsily on a bunker bed. When they walked past them, some of the inmates, most of them men, woke up from their drowsiness with a smirk on their lips.

"Hey pussy," somebody whispered.

On their right, two men in each their cell were leaning up against the bars, their uniforms clean, but their hair long and greasy.

"Nice pussy!" another hoarse voice whispered.

"Don't scare the ladies, Todd," a man from another cell yelled.

"Be quiet," the guard said harshly, which caused a roar from the prisoners.

Then shortly after as if a sudden paralyzing cold not of this world crept into the cells, the place was quiet. Their cell turned out to be the second last on the row. They had two neighboring cells, one empty, the other taken by two people.

"Here ladies," the guard said and took off their handcuffs, as he gently pushed them one by one behind the bars, all the time avoiding too much contact with them as if they were contagious.

"We will check on you regularly."

The guard used two keys to lock the door and walked back from where they had come from. Sera pressed her up against the bars and followed the man with her eyes until he was out of sight.

Selma sat down on the bed in the back of the room against the wall. She looked tired and scared but remained silent. Sera went over to the bed. She sensed, without looking, that someone in the neighboring cell was looking at them, but for some reason there were no more derogative cries. She sat down beside Selma, who was leaning up against the wall, staring into the air.

"I'm sorry, Selma," Sera said softly. "I should never have taken you with me...I'm sorry. So much new is happening in my life right now that I don't think that much."

They sat there for a while in silence, only an occasional clamor from the prisoners talking or arguing further down the corridor echoed through the barred spaces. Sera sat on the edge of the thin mattress, which was placed on a metal bed form. It creaked whenever she moved a little. She felt an urge to hold Selma like she imagined holding her child one day. There was a vague voice again, which longed to be heard. Sera could sense it, but she still didn't know how to get to it.

By a sudden impulse, Sera got up and walked to the bars and let her fingers run down them.

Then she realized where she was and tears sprang out. *I'm still alive though*, she thought. *But why did Doru ever show me that place? Maybe I should have called him instead of this? I must not moan. I have to be strong.*

The only light that reached the cells came from the long corridor and it only illuminated the front parts of the cells. The back parts of the cells were almost covered in darkness. Sera understood now why everybody was in the front part, watching each other, attracted by the light like moths.

“You think that’s what it takes, a lousy apology!” Selma suddenly cried out. “Look where you have put us! Look! I’m doomed when my dad hears about this. No more money. I’ll never forgive you,” Selma’s angry eyes gave off small sparks.

Sera closed her eyes as to close out the pain and loneliness she felt. The sensation of being watched grew. It comforted her and distracted her from feeling powerless. From the neighboring cell, an old, gray haired man with long arms and a beard looked at her. In the cell across a small black haired man sat, his eyes heavy and wet.

“And you are a friend, Sera. What kind of friend!! You and your stupid ideas! The truth is you can’t adjust to this city, you’re just a piece of...” Selma lingered and gave her a look of despair. The vibrations in Sera’s throat had suddenly come back and they were painful like a strong wind moving through her throat this time.

<sera siempre asi?  
 into the core of the earth  
 you swim to the shore on your own  
 ihre Waffen waren staerker  
 on s'en parler, l'un l'autre  
 maroniul pamantului  
 sembra che le radici  
 the sun shines here  
 losers win control  
 devoue a la touche  
 lyksalige, rene farver  
 culorile blinde  
 subtle breath>

When she returned to the cell again, her mind with her again, Selma was watching her. Sera didn't know how much time had passed, or if Selma had said anything to her. She was exhausted but persisted.

“Why did you go with me then? You knew where we were going? I told you, Selma.”

“Damn you girl! I just did! I trusted you!” Selma cried out.

Beads of perspiration stood on her forehead and her body shivered slightly. Sera walked over to her.

“What’s wrong?”

"I can't handle it, it's too much!" Selma looked at Sera, her eyes full of tears.

Sera sat down beside her and put her arms around her. She was wet and cold as if feverish.

"It's okay," Sera mumbled and stroked her hair. "You'll be all right. I'm here."

This close to her friend, she could hear a lamenting voice. *A pink one, just one!* it echoed through Selma and into Sera's head.

"I will feel better then," Selma whispered in between sobs.

"What is it you need?" Sera asked. She wanted to hear it from her voluntarily. "What are you're doing to yourself?"

"Just get a guard they will know, it's the pink ones!" Selma cried out and drew away from Sera.

"Another poor thing on chemicals," a male voice said from the neighboring cell to the right.

Sera looked up. The elderly man with the gray beard stood up against the bars. She noticed he had bushy gray eyebrows, a friendly mouth and a troubled forehead. He had stuck his head in between the gap of two bars; it was just big enough.

"Can you help me," Selma cried out.

"You have to get off that shit as soon as possible. Don't wait until you get to the edge, I have seen what that stuff does to people, lady. If it wasn't for my friend over there," he pointed toward one of the beds where another elderly man lay asleep. "I would have ended up in one of them labs. You know, them volunteer testers they use!" he whispered the last two sentences and looked around.

Selma had fallen back into Sera's arms, her head resting on her chest, but she began to be too heavy for Sera, who moved her head to her lap. Selma stirred, shivering.

"Maybe you should get some sleep, Selma," she whispered softly.

Selma looked as vulnerable as a small baby bird. Slowly and carefully Sera helped to maneuver Selma's body onto the bed. In order to give Selma all the legroom, she had to get up and walk over to the other bed where she sat down, close to where the man stood. Selma fell asleep on the side with her head resting in the cup of her hands.

The man walked closer. He smelled of dirt and his skin and clothes looked like they hadn't been washed for a long time.

"You have a lot of courage, my friend," the man spoke a little softer now that Sera was closer.

"Yeah, something has happened today, I don't think it's courage. I don't think I have that," she said.

"Ah," he answered.

"It's like you get all the way to the edge and when you look down, you see the life you have been given, what you have been neglecting, overlooking, and pushing away from yourself," she looked at her hands.

They had small faint lines and like the roots of a big old tree, they spread all over her palms.

Once a girl, she had met on the train going to Wellington, had read her palms. Sera hadn't paid as much attention to what the girl had said as to how the girl had touched and looked at every piece of her hands, back and front, nails and fingers. She remembered that the girl had told her that she had the gift to become a leader. She held the ability to heal people by her positive presence. It had made her laugh, but the girl could tell a lot of things that were true, like that she wrote well, was a successful student and athlete; that she kept to herself and had lost a family member when she was six. Sera looked at her hands and tried to remember more of what she had been told then, but it had vanished from her memory. She wondered if she could ever dig it out. It had to be stored inside somewhere, like the voices. She felt the man's eyes gazing at her. She wasn't afraid. He was a gentle spirit, just filthy.

"I don't know how I ever came to the edge. I'm afraid of heights," she said and smiled.

"We never know how these things happen, but there's a reason for everything we do, that's my personal philosophy. As long as we confide in that truth, it doesn't matter if you live on a mountain or in the deep underground," he laughed a little and looked over at his friend.

"He's in a bad condition. The lungs and his heart, I suspect. He's lived here for too long. I once tried to persuade him into moving south...it's a blessing when we can come here, have some food and water and a bed."

"Why are you here?" she asked and stared at the man in the back.

The man was lying on his side, snoring slightly. He wore a long coat, which covered him like a blanket. At the end two feet in socks stuck out. The man was balding, his hair was gray and dirty too.

"We don't have anywhere to go so we live under the Underground. They used to call us the mole people. We don't exist, if you know what I mean. They do raids, clean ups... to expand their territory, and it's all done in secrecy like the FBI, if you know what I am talking about. The dark hides all things. We sit there in the darkness, hiding like animals and wait for them to leave, but with their flashlights and torches and what have you, we stand no chance to protect ourselves. Not even the darkness can. But us, Charlie and me, we go a long way back before they shut down the Grounds. We actually enjoy our little journeys up here on level two. There's light here, more air and it's clean, you know there's a bathroom when they let us use it," he said and smiled contentedly. He paused and looked at her.

"But tell me why such a beautiful woman like yourself, if you don't mind me saying that, is here?"

His eyes glittered with anticipation. *Storytellers*, she thought, *we're all just storytellers*. She felt an urge to record all the strange things that were happening to her. She felt like writing again, letting all go and dig into it again. Even if it was merely keeping a journal of some kind.

"I went above and got caught," she whispered and felt like giggling.

Suddenly, it all seemed so absurd, but she composed herself and smiled instead. The man looked surprised, he lingered as if thinking about something and then he slapped his hands on his knees.

"And they didn't send you to the clinic or the lab?"

Sera shook her head.

"And how are you doing?"

"Good," she answered.

"I be damned. I be damned!" he cried out. "Wait until Charlie hears this. He's been rambling about the Grounds all of his life, talking about the conspiracy...", he lowered his voice.

"I knew those people had to have some unsavory things on their conscience, but I be damned. Amen," he said and directed his eyes toward her.

"How did you know?"

"Someone took me there. He knew."

"What's it like up there?"

"Oh...", she lingered and tried to remember the smells and colors. "The streets are deserted and it's like stepping into a desert, only there are buildings, and trees and plants are growing everywhere. They have literally penetrated the hard concrete. The best thing is the sun and the wind, together they just go through your body and make your skin smell good, like leaves," she said and remembered that that was how Doru smelled and when he had entered her, it felt like running through the lush bush and fields, a soft green light.

"I think, we can change this world...", she lingered, surprised by her spontaneous thought.

"But how?" he asked and stretched his neck.

"I don't know. Something tells me since everything in life is moving, in one way or another, we affect this movement by contracting or releasing. They are part of each other, but timing is everything," she paused aware of how she was discovering new thoughts as she spoke.

From Charlie's bed, they suddenly heard moans from sharp pains. They both moved toward the bed, Sera from behind the bars.

"Benji, are you there?" Charlie mumbled, he had tears in his eyes.

She felt pity for the old man. He was thin and worn out as if life was leaving his body. Then she noticed his eyes, which, on the contrary, were two shiny, brown balls of light. He looked over at her and smiled vaguely. She smiled back and as she listened, she felt the buzzing in her throat.

"I never know what to do with him. He won't talk to me. He is always driveling."

She smiled. *He wants to leave this world but can't*, she thought.

"I think he needs lots of water and good deep breathing, and food, of course," she said.

"You a doctor?" Benji asked.

She shook her head.

“Don’t tell me you hear voices too!” Benji said and started to pour water from a pitcher into a cup, and helped Charlie to drink.

She felt her heart beat faster.

“I always told you, Charlie, you were full of good ideas...crazy old man,” Benji said while Charlie drank. “You’re not leaving us yet, are you?”

“No, he’s fine. Make him eat more. I think he needs to be reminded of this life. He seems to live somewhere else,” she said and paused.

*On the other side*, she thought. Those were not her words. They were his, but she had a feeling of what they meant. She could feel them inside, almost hear them.

“Charlie, you hear that? Charlie?” Benji asked and cast a glance at Sera, who wished she could go through the bars and get closer to the old man.

“Yeah, yeah. Shut up, fool! I’m not going anywhere. Help me stand up!” Charlie cried out with a deep husky voice and Benji took his arms and supported him with his whole body.

“So, how do I get my appetite back, lady?” Charlie asked and moved closer to the bars.

“Look at or simply think of beautiful things. Move your body more, breathe more. That will revitalize you, bring more oxygen to your brain,” she replied.

“Who told you this? The other side or are you some kind of expert?” he asked and stared at her.

“I think it is you, Mister!” she said.

“Me!” he looked at her, puzzled. “I never thought I had a voice within...,” he paused and looked at his hands.

“It’s Charlie, no Mister me here. We’re among friends,” he said and shook hands with her through the bars. His hand was bony and weak.

“Sera,” she answered.

“Ah,” Charlie said.

“She’s been to the Grounds, Charlie!” Benji joined in.

“Ah,” Charlie rumbled; his voice deep and sonorous.

His body swayed slightly even though Benji held him firmly. Charlie looked at Sera attentively. She had a feeling he knew something about her and people from the other side.

“Ea will hear your voice soon. She has been listening for it for many years. She travels into your dreams sometimes,” he said and smiled.

He lingered for a moment, as if he hadn’t been aware of what he had just said.

“Lovely,” he mumbled and went back to the bed.

“Food, you say. As if I don’t have better things to do. Down there we live off rats and the like, you know. You don’t find any greens down there. In fact, that color doesn’t exist. That’s why we enjoy our monthly excursion, right Benji?” he said and Benji nodded and they both smiled to her.

“Benji! Where’s that damn food?” his face frowned again. His face changed expressions all the time, from playfulness to irritation to joy to anger.

Benji reached under his bed and pulled out a tray of what looked like cold machine food, brown and green substances.

“Thanks. Eat, you say,” Charlie said and started eating, one fork of food at a time while looking at Sera. He chewed very slowly.

“From the machine, I bet you,” he said after having chewed his first couple of bites. “So you’re a buzzer too!” he asked casually.

Sera nodded silently. She guessed that was what he called people like them.

“Giving you sleepless nights?” he asked.

“No not anymore.”

He looked a little skeptically at her.

“I am learning to control when I tune in and when I don’t. It works like radio waves.”

Charlie took another bite reluctantly while Benji supervised his movements.

“I hear them...thousands of them...they’re calling out from their graves, lamenting what happened, praying for us...,” Charlie mumbled under his moustache as if embarrassed.

Selma stirred and suddenly sat up as if still asleep.

“No,” she bemoaned. “Tell me it’s just a dream!”

“It’s not, my girl,” Charlie said with a half open mouth full of well-chewed food.

“Who are you?”

“Selma, this is Charlie and Benji,” Sera said and smiled.

“Feeling better?” Benji asked.

“No, who cares anyway!” Selma’s eyes flickered and she looked with confusion from one face to another.

“You’ll be out of here, soon!” Charlie said.

“And how do you know?” Selma said and looked at the old man, an attempt of a smile on her lips turning into a grimace.

“Silence!” a guard, who walked down the corridor, exclaimed. “Go to your beds. Lights out!”

o o o o

*It is night, dark in the small streets paved with cobblestones and dust. She walks alone. She does not know I am there, watching. Following her steps and motions. I feel I have come to protect her from the loneliness of the world, which I have become so familiar with. I have a message with me. If she wants to break the boundaries that make her feel confined, she can. Life is full of unlimited possibilities waiting to*

*be grasped.*

*I realize where she is going. To her lover. The one who showed her the world of ecstasy. The one who will follow her to the ends of the world. But she is still young, vulnerable and uncertain of her steps and longings.*

*I can smell the ocean and the mountains nearby, fresh air and saltwater. It is like the town is embraced by both of them. Even in the late hours of the night. It is cloudy. A faint light comes from the street lamps casting shrouded shadows on the ground. She stops in front of a small, wooden house with red windows, a white facade and yellow door. Inside we can hear the sounds of a woman. There is movement of energy. The angels of love surround us, I see their silent, blissful faces, and still I feel her confusion. There is a door, which isn't quite open yet, a door which she has to open when the time is ripe. She thinks of the day, when He told her about the seed, about her path. It was in this same place.*

*She is at the ocean. A different ocean. There is less dust here, less heat. She is dipping a little child into the ripples of the water. She sings as she does so. I sing with her in my mind, knowing that I cannot meet her this time. The child's laughter is euphoric. It reaches into my deepest longings. And I realize I am that child, the messenger. I know he is there too, standing further up the beach, observing silently with love and affection. There is inner freedom. A profound love that goes beyond the body, into the realms of dreams and visions.*

# XI

The fleshy insides of the bluish purple petals shone bright yellow as if a light burned inside each of the twelve long-stemmed flowers. She stuck her face all the way into the softness of the flowers and as she sniffed them, a scentless texture revealed itself to her. Her disappointment was only brief and couldn't defeat her joy. No one had ever given her lilies before. Majestic flowers like those were hard to get hold of. They were for privileged folks and there were few of them around. As she read the little card, attached to the bouquet, one of the secretaries entered the room and looked on with amazement.

*'Dearest Soledad with all of my love.  
Please come tonight.  
Kisses and hugs Matthew.'*

*It is curious,* she thought and smiled.

"They look lovely. Not the cheap kind either," a woman consultant said as she entered the copy room.

"Who's the lucky man?" she asked and winked to Soledad when she looked up.

"I am lucky too," Soledad said and thought about the woman's smile, which had that vibrancy she missed among the people working here.

Soledad held her breath, praying that no further inquiries would be made. She knew better than to make contact with people here. She looked about the room and opened herself to the energies of the room. It no longer seemed as perplexed as when she had first arrived. People smiled more often too. It warmed her. Maybe, after all, her meditations bore fruit and when they ripened she would be ready to do what had to be done, whatever that may turn out to be. *May the Goddess guide me gently,* she thought.

She would go to the ocean when that day came, welcome it with open eyes. Maybe she would get hold of a bicycle and ride it to the water front and watch the silvery glittering reflections of small,

energetic sparks of sunlight, as they made a kindled dance on the surface. George had described to her the bridges that crossed the river from Manhattan onto Long Island. She imagined the magic of the playful water seen from one of those bridges; she imagined the silence of that place, so far away from the corridors of the Underground where sound bounced on and off every wall, vault, and ceiling. Underneath the vast, boundless skies sound would travel freely, up and away. There would be the most magnificent quietness she could imagine. An air so still, she would have to scream from the top of her lungs to break it. An air so pure like the love of God.

Matthew loved the ocean, he had told her. Maybe because he knew intuitively that it would have a healing effect. Water. The element of movement and adaptability. He had framed an old card with the photo of a big breaking wave, forming a circle. At the center of the circle, hitting the water on its way, a fat ray of sunlight entered. She wondered if he had ever seen it in reality. Much could be experienced and learned through visual images, sounds and even artificial smells, but not the salt, sun and wind merging into one scent. It wasn't like sniffing flowers, it absorbed and overwhelmed you completely, and its mystery filled all of your senses like moonlight.

She went about her work with a lightness in her heart, and just at the top of her head she could hear the waves breaking and the wind blowing. Just like she remembered them from the time she was living in Florida with her parents. The waves of the ocean moved like life, flowed with adaptability, reason and depth. She knew the bliss of life. It manifested itself in the elements, in love, in change. She had felt it again with Doru, her old lover. If Matthew opened his heart to her, she, one of Shakti's many daughters, would bring him bliss. Did he understand the strength of the heart and how far it could take him? Would he ever with her? If he did, and they let go of all their attachments, they could perhaps catch a glimpse of the light of the universe within their hearts. And through their hearts, they could bring joy and enlightenment to others miles around them. They could become great healers not only of themselves but also of others. They could become one.

o o o o

"Are you hungry, Selma?" Sera asked.

The guards had put two trays of breakfast in front of their door. Sera had been up for a while talking to her two new friends, telling them about Aotearoa. When she woke up, Selma had withdrawn into herself again and refused to talk to Sera.

"I'll just put it in front of your bed. You need to eat to get back your strength. I'm sure we'll get out of here soon."

Selma stared at her stiffly.

"If you need to talk anytime..." Sera said softly and paused for a moment. "I'm really sorry. It

was stupid of me to bring you with me. It was selfish of me to put you into danger.”

She stood there for a while looking at Selma, her hair tousled and her skin sickly pale, as if cold; just the other night it had been boiling hot. Sera walked up to the door and stuck her nose through the narrow space between the bars. The corridor was quiet now. There were no more comments or talk in corners, as if someone had silenced them all.

In the opposite cell, a young man in a black outfit sat on a bed, bent over, his head resting in the cup of his hands, as if too heavy for his neck to carry. Then further down the corridor, near the entrance of the cells, she suddenly heard the jingle of keys. A guard and another uniformed man walked down the corridor, their firm steps echoed through the barred spaces. They stopped at the cell opposite Sera. The other man looked at Sera for a second. His eyes were hard, but she sensed they concealed something. His face belonged to the crowds. She watched them on the platforms and trains, in the corridors and markets of the Underground, reserved and blank as if a life of constant hardships had been printed in the lines of their faces. His voice surprised her; a mellow tune rang in her ears.

“They let you go, come on!” he said.

He had big round eyes and long hands and feet. The other man quickly got up from his bed.

“Josh. It’s so good to see you,” the man in the cell said and lingered. First, he looked at Josh, then at the guard who was opening the door. “Don’t look at me like that. I don’t know.... I didn’t do this.”

“It’s okay, I bailed you out.”

The guard held the door open and the two men stopped in front of each other as if to embrace one another, but remained frozen in a mutual gaze.

She heard the front door lock and walked over to her bed, glancing at Selma who didn’t notice anything, or at least didn’t appear to do so. The previous day’s symptoms had ebbed out to a slight shivering, but the fire in her was only burning more forcefully, strikingly.

“Next time it’s your turn, my angel,” Charlie said in a low voice.

Sera shrugged her shoulders as she met his gaze. A faded yellow book was resting in his lap, opened half way through.

“I certainly hope so,” Sera said.

“I wouldn’t mind staying a while longer until I have to go back down...,” Charlie paused and looked at Benji who nodded quietly.

“Why do you go back then?”

“What else is there to do? Life in the Underground isn’t much better. They are just gonna set us up, give us one of those cards and register us, put us into the system like test animals. We can’t live that life anymore!” said Benji.

“Unless we could live above!” continued Charlie and smiled.

“Maybe one day you can show us the place you’ve been...,” Benji had a dreamy look on his face. “We live under the Grand Station, right down here, somewhere,” Benji said and pointed his finger toward the floor. “You just go as deep as you can get, find one of those old black doors near the trains,” Benji continued excitedly.

“Fool, she’ll never find it with directions like that. It’s like a maze and it’s dark down there,” Charlie exclaimed.

Sera wondered too, and recalled the windy corridors she had got lost in; the safety Selma spoke of didn’t apply for all of the Underground.

“You want to hear a story?” Charlie suddenly asked and lifted his book into the air. Sera noticed that it was full of loose sheets of paper, which stuck out at the sides. He pulled one sheet out and squinted as he looked it over.

“This story I was told when I was very young, twenty, I think. I have told it many times so I practically know it by heart. I suspect that Mr. Magenson was one of them too, but he never admitted to it. And I didn’t have the nerve to ask too many questions then, he was a mighty authoritative man that Mr. Magenson,” Charlie paused and put down the sheet with handwritten letters and small sketches, which from where Sera was seated looked like a child’s doodles and drawings.

“How old were you Charlie when you first heard them?” she asked, realizing what he was talking about. She imagined living in the dark made communication a little different.

“Twelve. They almost send me to the clinic then. The loony bin, you know! It was my luck that times were hard for my parents then.”

He paused and smiled as if he had just caught a bright thought.

“First, I begin this tale, which is a true story of course, by telling you about the angels. You know the spirits, who help us human beings toward finding a life of wholeness and joy. They don’t live that far from here. They have found their own place to hide out. Just as we have. The angels used to be much closer to us in a parallel dimension, which was invisible to most people. Now that changed like so many other things do. The story is about how that happened.

“There was no night in the kingdom of the angels. A serene light flooded this versatile land, whether you were among the trees, lakes and fields of the country, or among the sand, rocks, and ocean of the coastline, or in the mountains, valleys, or dry desert dust, or among skyscrapers, urban buildings, paved streets, alleys, and subterranean worlds. The light was there so that the angels could always see the path they were taking, as they traveled high and low throughout the land, their hands and arms always ready to embrace, comfort and direct,” Charlie whispered and smiled, as if he could clearly see that light.

Then he paused for a while.

"At the time, when the angels still lived in that invisible world within ours, before the Final War, there lived a man. There were many people like him. But still he wasn't the usual kind of man. His name was Omar, and he was one of the gifted ones, who could see and communicate with the angels. To him both worlds were visible. To curious people, who would ask him over and over, if they could possibly see them too, he replied:

"In order to see them, you have to be able to give from an open, loving heart."

"And most people took that answer, and walked away, thinking they knew what he was talking about. But opening ones heart wasn't really that easy in a society, which put the value of gold, jewelry, cars, a good job, a beautiful wife, and a fat bank account higher than the heart.

"On few occasions, Omar felt that people were genuinely interested in knowing, and he would continue.

"If you concentrate really hard, if you open your arms and stretch them out so that the air can touch your heart, then look toward the sky. You may be able to hear their whispers, or see them when the wind plays with the glittering leaves of the treetops, and catch their mild, peaceful smiles. If you are really lucky, they will come to you in your dreams in one shape or another."

"Omar, who worked as a craftsman in the daytime, used to walk at dawn along the coast and watch the angels, as they flew in over the big city to assist any broken hearts in need of support. He had discovered that especially at dawn the veil that parted the land of angels from the world of people wasn't as thick, and he could catch glimpses of their reality. He knew from ancient tales that there had been times when angels had lived freely among people without the need of any veils. That was before civilization stopped believing in the spirit, and life was exclusively directed to the body and mind; spiritual life was for priesthood or the hereafter."

Charlie looked thrilled over the interest and anticipation his listeners showed. There was only his deep voice left in the entire prison space, all other sounds were lost. Then Charlie continued his story.

"Time and again, Omar would realize that something dreadful was bound to happen before life could go back to its harmonious state. He wasn't afraid, merely concerned and a bit disappointed in the inevitable. He never spoke to a soul about his premonition. Perhaps he should have, perhaps it would have made a difference. He carried on his life, as he had always done. Until one day, when an angel he had never met before came to him.

"She looked very much like a human being, dressed in black, eyes hidden behind dark glasses.

"There is no avoiding it anymore," she said with a hoarse voice. You have to leave. We have put together a group, and you must go hide out with them, where no harm can reach you.

"Omar thought for a long time that day, what would be the best to do. Stay, or hide away to

return one day. When she came back that following morning, he had packed his few belongings and went with her. They walked along, while the sun slowly rose, staring through the veils of the world. As he came out of a deep contemplation on the ultimate opposites of life and death, Omar saw the others. They were all walking separately with an angel next to them.

"It seemed the sun would never rise, and they walked for the longest time, though Omar had no sense of time anymore, he knew only of his tired feet and limbs. In this state of walking along with his fellow human beings, Omar realized why he had packed his things and had not objected to going away. Where he was going, he could do much more good, finally united with a world that was home to him.

"After a long journey, they came to a rock crevice in the cliffs that they were passing along the beach. The waves washed ashore and touched the opening of the rocks, as if the place was inviting everything into it. They walked through the narrow crevice. Surrounding them were strange rock formations. They looked like faces and beings that had been put there to guard the place. Omar was sure that to some, their faces would not be so congenial.

"At the end of the many passages through the rock, they came to an immense grotto, where everything could grow and breathe, because of a mysterious, beautiful light that reached out to all nooks. Here a whole community lived peacefully. An underground paradise, it was indeed! Omar settled down here, and they say he hasn't returned yet, only in people's dreams, and when they reach out those arms toward the sky above and remember an echo of some faraway past.

"They say that when we emerge back into that world which we once so recklessly tore down, Omar and the others will find their way back too, and guide us along. And we will rise above suffering and sadness, veils and false promises toward bliss."

Charlie paused for a moment, his face soft and open with surprise.

"Charlie, I thought you missed out on the love story," Benji said disappointedly.

"Ah, but I told you the essentials! Gosh, I haven't told this for so long. I've neglected magic. What a shame really!" he exclaimed loudly. "I guess we're the only bunch left believing in this stuff, anyway...."

"Where did you find the story?" Sera asked.

"Will you guys shut up!" Selma suddenly cried out from her bed. "I'm sick and tired of listening to your nonsense!"

Sera looked at her friend with surprise. *If we could read people's minds like angels, with the same compassion, would we be able to help each other more easily?* Sera thought.

Then more firm footsteps echoed off the walls down the corridor. Two guards stopped outside their cell.

"They have released you, you girls!" the tallest of the guards said, his voice vibrating deeply while

the other man unlocked the door.

Selma got up swiftly and walked toward the two men with a stiff gaze.

"About time!" she mumbled, but they heard her and their faces turned harsh.

"Next time, you are not going to get away so easily. We know about you."

The other man pointed at Selma as if she was a leper.

Sera looked back at her two friends.

"So long," Benji said.

"I'm sure we'll meet again," Charlie added. "Just keep a lookout for those angels, and take care."

Sera stood speechless for a moment, then the guards grunted and she stirred.

"It was good to meet you," she finally said.

"And Sera," Charlie said as the women walked out of the cell. "Ea is always close, and she knows you two will meet again. This time without difficulty."

First the two guards took them to the front desk where they had been introduced to Mr. Coldburn, the superior officer. He wasn't there; instead a tall, blond woman with thick, strong arms handled their case. They were given their few belongings, some watches, their ID-cards. The two guards followed them to the main entrance, the big wooden door with the metal rings. When they came out on the other side, the air felt fresher and lighter. They were underneath the Grand Central Station. A long slim tunnel led them to a staircase. It felt like moving out of the stomach of a great monster, through its gullet. At the end of the staircase, light came from the big old Central hall.

The enclosed darkness of the tunnels and corridors, which had seemed so distant behind the protective bars in the warm prison air and in the company of her two new friends, now reached her again, and she had to stop. It was so silent that she thought she could hear voices from beyond the subterranean walls, crying out dreamily as if they could reach for a light of deliverance.

The apartment seemed different all of a sudden, with no familiarity to it. Maybe it was the oppressive silence Selma so persistently held onto, maybe it was Sera's eagerness to see Doru again, which drove her away from the stagnant air of the apartment to head north by the Underground tunnels of Inwood. *Breathe all the way into your diaphragm*, she repeated to herself and felt her breath quiet down, as she walked. It was such a relief to control her body, become aware of its functions, its magic. She thought of Charlie, his hands were strong like a bear's paws and his eyes held such delicate thoughts, such profound warmth.

She continued walking and felt lighter, a spirit floating in the air. Doru had talked about the soul. He claimed that he could feel hers. Sometimes, it was a liquid entering him, sometimes a vibration of light, at other times a vision behind his eyelids. And even though he would never completely grasp the essence of her being, he could feel her and share with her life's wisdom and love.

When he spoke about these things, he always spoke with such compassion and gentleness, and she couldn't get enough. But she knew that he probably never would get to the core of her, not because she was ungraspable, but because he would not go that far. He came from some place else. Perhaps from another planet. She knew so little about him. Even so, his words slipped so easily into her mind, living and growing inside of her, that it scared her. He was a stranger to her world, to her dreams, to her stories, and yet did that really matter much? She was safe in a rare kind of way. It was safe to love, but unsafe to assume or expect. There were no enclosed spaces with him to bind her, but there would be air and space in whatever measures she needed.

She walked up the creaking stairs, secretly prolonging the thrill of anticipation. He had sounded joyful on the phone, surprised somehow, but not in any alarming way. His door was agape, and she pushed it open gently. He was sitting on the floor, his legs crossed, and his feet resting on his thighs as if his legs were made of rubber. His face was caught in sweetness.

She took off her shoes, stepped into the living room, and sat down in front of him. *How can I know you?* she thought and he instantly opened his eyes.

"What a wondrous view!" he exclaimed and took her into his arms forcefully.

"How are you, my love?" he added and looked deeply into her eyes with curiosity.

Then he took her foot, undressed it and kissed it on the front and back. She felt warm inside, loved with devotion. They didn't meditate. They quickly undressed and emerged into each other. They went on for a very long time until her body tired achingly, released into this unaccustomed and new, endless male touch; where orgasm was infinite and loving, where the body was no longer separate from the heart and mind, where she could be playful and let go of every inhibition she held, where two souls, two breaths merged into one. They fell quietly asleep in each other's embrace.

In the morning, they woke to golden and orange rays, naked branches, and white clouds. She spoke her first words then, lifted her voice from her throat while she held onto his smooth, shiny skin like a blanket. She spoke about the stories she brought with her, and he listened attentively, understanding that she had come a long way.

What she didn't speak of that early morning, woken by the colors of light, was her greatest fear, which no longer was to let him go or the possibility of losing him, but that some day they may not be able to remember, their minds and bodies no longer in their possession, floating in an invisible amorphousness, trapped, perhaps, somewhere between here and the other side. She must have traveled to that state of mind in her dreams, because she understood what it meant not to be in or out of the body, floating ignorantly around it. Endlessly lost. Not belonging.

He left her in the apartment by herself, wandering from one room to another, studying the window views from every possible angle. After an hour, she thought reluctantly of her studies, and took in the aromas of his place one last time before walking home. She adjusted her eyes quickly to

the somberness of the subterranean streets, while her soul still floated above the city, looking as far as its eyes could reach. Glittering slightly from the dance of the rays and surrounding angels, it listened for the winds and the many songs of the world.

“Sera,” Selma’s face stared mockingly at her, eyes turned downwards.

Sera noticed disappointedly that Selma had put the black curtains back up on the windows.

“Why did you do that?” she asked and pointed at the black rubber, feeling alienated and shut out.

“Sera, I think you have to leave.”

Sera looked at her friend and her eyes burned with the throbbing in her mind.

“What?”

“Don’t make it more difficult,” Selma’s composed voice was prepared for the worst. “It’s not going to work. It’s my place, my name on the lease.”

*Just like that!* she thought and felt lost in a web of ungraspable, unspeakable emotions.

“I have to go now...,” Selma said and paused as if catching her breath after a long dive. Then she took her bag and left the apartment, slamming the door behind her.

Sera stood for a moment in the living room, frozen in separation. *Is this real?* she thought. *Or am I hearing voices again?* She didn’t cry, which surprised her, she started collecting her most important books and clothing, packing it into her backpack. The rest of her belongings, she put in a big pile in one corner of her room after having moved the bookshelf to the side.

She went to the house computer and let her fingers dance over the keys:

*Dear mother*

*As of today I will be moving. Major dispute between Selma and I. I can’t tell you my new address yet, I’m still looking, but don’t be alarmed. I am fine. I have friends. I will keep you posted regularly. I hope all is well with you, got to go now. I love you, Sera :-)*

She got off at the 116 stop. It was in between rush hours, still not noon and the usual busy confusion of elbows and feet on the platforms was absent. The backpack weighed heavy on her shoulders like a snail house, slowing her down. She had only packed minimally, she wondered now what that really meant. She maneuvered her way through the turnstiles and stopped to look at the map of the area. She hadn’t been there for a long time. There were many Underground streets and passages here. The lines on the map confused her. They quickly became dots and squares with cryptic meanings, like a language of an ancient world. Her mind was blurry and hazy. She thought of the darkness Charlie had described to her, how the Mole people had adapted to this lightless, remote

realm. She could never live there. It would be like a restless sleep she couldn't wake up from.

She started walking south a little right of the Broadway system. The lighting worked perfectly here and the passages were clean and well maintained. She strolled down an almost empty main street with high ceilings where cross paths connected to shopping and housing. A couple of faces appeared from corners and stepped up in front of her, staring at her backpack, then at her face blankly.

Once there had been a major university, but it hadn't survived the reforms of the Ustodians. Now, most of the place was rented out as rooms or apartments for everybody, no longer limited to the elite. She turned down one tunnel and found the building she had written down on a piece of paper. The woman hadn't sounded nice on the phone, but it was an affordable place and with such short notice, she couldn't afford to be picky. The building had no elevator and as she entered, an ancient shaped staircase met her eyes. It coiled like a spiral and she could see the top from the bottom. The stairs creaked as she stepped on them, and she feared that she might fall through. A woman, wearing a big black dress, and gold and silver chains and braces, opened the door. The woman had lips painted red and eyes with blue and purple shades. Sera recognized her voice from the phone.

"What do you want?" she asked; her voice taut and hoarse.

"I called concerning the room you are subletting? Sera Skau. How do you do?" she said and stretched her hand out to show politeness.

"Oh, it's you," the woman said without a smile and opened the door.

The apartment smelled of dust and smoke. They walked through a long, narrow corridor. She felt she was still in the Underground streets. They passed a few doors and stopped at the end of the corridor in front of a door.

"This would be your room," the woman said and opened the door.

It was small, but big enough for her. There was no furniture, only a mattress and a closet. The paint on the walls was slowly peeling in long, slim strands. There was only one lamp, which hung from the ceiling and lit up the bare walls.

"And the bathroom and kitchen?" Sera asked her voice quivering slightly.

"The bathroom is second door on your right. I'll give you an electrical kettle and stove. Kitchen isn't part of the deal for you dear," the woman said and smirked.

"And no late night visits, no sleepovers," she said sending out spit and a sweaty breath.

Sera made an attempt to smile.

"So are you taking it? It is only \$200 a month. You won't get anything cheaper around here." The woman smiled now, the prospect of money making her loosen up.

"I'll think about it," Sera said and walked past the woman, steering toward the exit.

"Yeah, you think about it, sweetie and someone else will have taken it."

Sera saw herself out, leaving the stench of dust, sweat and smoke behind. At the top of the spiral staircase, she paused and looked down. She followed the banisters as they descended down and around, endlessly. The world was whirling around itself, and around her. She felt nausea and out of breath. Was she falling in the same direction or was another dream obstructing her senses? A dream in another dream?

The comp shop was crowded and she had to wait in line for a computer. People sat mostly on their own in front of green computers, and all the furniture was mint green, a strange contrast to the lavender walls. She sat down at the counter and slurped a glass of lemonade and ate a cookie, which was far too sweet for her mood. The room buzzed from machinery and muffled voices. She took out her address book and began to go over her addresses with her fingernail. Who could she 'screen', who would gladly put up with her until she found something? How could she find anything here without contacts? Would the Ustodians help a foreigner who had already turned down the dorm room which the university had offered her when she first came to the city? And she a foreigner, who had gone to prison for trespassing?

She looked at the black screen, while her fingers touched the keys, as easily as reaching for something in her pocket. She put her card into the side of the screen.

"Good morning, Miss Sera Skau. Welcome to the Worldwide screenomat. Press the number and name when you are ready. If you have any questions please press the HELP button."

Sera kept staring at the screen, wondering who had donated her voice to the machine. At home the computer would always use the voice of some famous person. Some people even had their own voice downloaded, but that was too weird for her; listening to your own voice as something outside of yourself. She called up Julia, whom she had studied with for a little while.

"Hi Julia," Sera said as she could hear someone pick up, but without linking the screen.

"Hello."

"Julia?" Sera stared into the black glass surface, where instead of a picture small obscure letters and numbers appeared. It felt like looking into a black hole ever expanding. "I need your help, Julia. Can you see me?"

"You are clear. What's wrong? You look awful, Sera!"

"Thank you. No, Selma threw me out, I need a place to crash for a couple of days," she pleaded.

"Why did she throw you out?"

"Long story."

"Billy is here. I'm sorry. I have to get ready for work. But good luck!"

"Thanks."

After three unsuccessful screens, she checked her mail and scrolled the net for available rooms.

They were all too expensive. She had been lucky being able to live with Selma. And there was no way she would go back to that lady. For a moment, she considered screening Frank. Something told her that he would help. He always helped people. She couldn't though if she wanted to keep some kind of reasonable contact with Selma. She couldn't think of anyone else. Her luck was running out. She grabbed her card and walked randomly around the neighborhood. She had only ventured walks a few times when she had been hunting for good shots, but she had soon given up, tired of having to carry her tripod wherever she went and not finding any beautiful shots through her lens. It was only endless webs of corridors and passages blessed with very little light.

After a long time of wandering the passages and avoiding the looks from people, she passed a tunnel musician, a big, dark skinned man who played the guitar. His fingers slid effortlessly up and down the strings, and from them came a soft and gentle melody. She stopped and took her backpack off, pulled out her camera and aimed it at the musician. When the flash went off and the man noticed her, he stopped playing.

"What' you doing, lady?" he whined. "Who are you taking pictures for?"

"Nobody," she replied surprised.

"I don't like you taking no pictures of me. What good is that for, anyway?" he said and started packing his guitar. "I don't want any trouble, you hear me?" he fired his words at her like a machine gun.

"I'm sorry," she said and packed her camera away. "Why do you play here?"

"None of your business," he said and grabbed his guitar and walked away.

She watched his back move up and down, his trousers, too big for him, hang loosely down. He limped a little on one leg. She would have loved to have given him something, but she doubted he had a money machine. Even if she had had coins or notes, they would have been worthless to him, in this world. Somewhere she could hear singing, a soft gentle voice which reminded her of the same melody he had played. The musician, though, had only played on his guitar; he had not been singing.

She started walking again. The load on her back, her sore muscles and limbs, together with the many rejections, added to a tiredness which was weighing heavily on her. The kitchen would probably be full of Selma's home cooking now, both TV and radio running like two meters ticking out of stroke. Maybe she had gone out to wherever she went from time to time, leaving everything undone, out of order. For a moment, Sera thought of finding a phone, but the idea quickly left her. Her hands were shaking. *Where can I go?* she repeated to herself over and over.

She walked into an obscure bakery with walls of bread and cakes, fruits and nuts, where a small woman with a long, pointed nose and wrinkled eyes greeted her. She ordered baked bread with cheese, an expensive luxury, nevertheless, she slipped the cashier her card without hesitation. The bread was soft and moist, almost sweet when it touched her palate. She felt its comfort like a heavy

blanket over her body. Eating quieted her down. In a matter of seconds she had finished the sandwich and she wished for more, but controlled herself. She had walked for hours and evening came without warning in the Underground. She had to act.

Her body ached from the walking and the load on her back, but more so when she thought of the darkness underneath the Underground where Benji and Charlie came from. Would there be any light there? Anything could happen down there; she could get lost and eaten by the hungry lions of the darkness. She would not live for long there; not even her new friends could be of much help.

She walked to the nearest train station and boarded the first train that came. The rush hour crowds had set in like hungry predators, but they kept a distance from her big snail house, and she easily boarded the train. The cool air inside the doors soothed her damp, sweaty body. The cold walls, people's odorless bodies, the voices surrounding her, and the spirits of another world couldn't reach her, they were outside of her and yet, at the same time, her body absorbed the world around her, tuning into voices, which manifested like a sudden gust of wind.

<mi lascia senza fiato  
 viviamo per ognuno d noi  
 huele como el suelo  
 i spejlet  
 the room is filled with people  
 forme familiare  
 green of the leaves  
 le ciel et au dessus  
 me estoy consumando  
 vœer åben  
 plein d'entrain  
 there is plenty of room  
 beskyttet af himlens vœelving  
 cosmic sound  
 we are below  
 purest blue>

And then for a long time, she heard nothing else, until somebody touched her face. At first, she thought it was one of the voices taking the form of a wind sweeping her skin. Then the smell of her skin, her sweaty hands, and a soreness just behind her eyelids brought her back to physicality. Back into her body standing next to other's. And exhaustedly, as if she had been on a long journey, she sighed a little.

"Now sit down here," an elderly woman in front of Sera ordered gently as the woman got up from her seat, clearing the way for Sera and her backpack.

The woman had long dark hair and was wearing a purple scarf. Sera stared into the woman's eyes, dark blue gems; hands that would grip her and throw her back and forth gently, in her cradle, in her swing, and in the ocean water. What joy those eyes had expressed. And so Sera listened for that voice from so long ago. When the woman did speak again, smiling without really responding to

Sera's stare, Sera knew another strange projection had sent her off into another space, and she sighed once more quietly.

"That backpack is too heavy for a young girl like you. Where would you travel to in this world, anyway?"

Sera shrugged her shoulders, her voiceless tongue had nothing to project, and the elderly woman smiled with concern. Then the woman did something very surprising, she took Sera's hand and squeezed it a little. There they were side by side, silently, Sera resting on the seat, while the train glided over the coiling and twisting rails underneath. For a while it felt like home; safe and untouchable.

At Canal Street, the woman helped Sera get up from her seat and gently pushed her out of the opening train doors. The world still looked a little hazy from where she was, but Sera remained calm. Ea was right here in that gentle woman with steadfast stature and unwavering gestures. And she remembered Charlie's comforting words about Ea, which had surprised her. The woman and Sera walked in silence for a long time, going toward the street tunnels leading to the housing areas. Then finally, as they turned away from the main corridors, the woman spoke.

"Now, we can speak, my child. We wouldn't want to run any risk. My name is Clara," she said, squeezed Sera's hand again, and let go of it.

Her hand felt cold, shivering slightly, once back on its own again.

"Sera."

"You haven't lived here for long, my girl. I can tell. A student?" Clara said and smiled again, her eyes closing slightly as if in meditation.

Sera nodded, but kept silent.

They walked through three different tunnels. The first one was long and wide, the walls and the high ceilings were white and dry from the air boosters. Sera could feel the dryness in her nostrils and it was as unpleasant as breathing in the dusty air of her Grandma's attic or the room on Broadway Uptown. A steady passage of people came through here, and there wasn't a moment of stillness. They soon turned right into a narrower tunnel, less crowded where the walls were still white, but the ceilings lower. There were less signs and lights here and the air was more pleasant. The last tunnel they turned into there was only the two of them, and the walls and ceilings were narrowing in so that Sera had to hunch over a little in some places. At the end of the tiny dead-end tunnel a small emergency exit sign hang, wavering on the dark, poorly illuminated wall.

"I live in the big house over there," Clara said and pointed beyond the tunnel, toward a set of stairs rising from out of nowhere.

"I am sorry you can't see anything from here, of course. You used to be able to see it from a far distance. That was before the war," Clara sighed and stared blankly into the air, absorbed by the

memory of another time.

"How long have you lived in this city?" Sera asked curiously.

She remembered talking to George about the war and the time before, the two rivers, the world under the sky. It was a myth and yet, she had been up there, and she had felt there was a way to wake the sleeping beauty and change everything.

"Oh, I don't know anymore. I am getting old. Too old for all of this, that's for sure! I wish the world would soon realize it can liberate itself from all this, this..." she looked for the right word, but couldn't find it.

"Well, I am sure you will find out for yourself. You seem like an open, evolved being. We can use more people like you. I am glad, if I can help you in any way, my dear," the lady sighed and as if it needed all of her attention, she lifted her foot to climb the small stone steps, which appeared at the end of the tunnel.

They climbed the stairs, slowly. What looked like sand or really dry soil was sprayed onto the steps and made the climb a little slippery. There were many steps. Sera hadn't seen such a long staircase before. The constructs of the Underground world were as manifold as the mysteries of the stars and the ocean. It seemed there were no limits to what shapes and colors could appear in this world so limited by its borders and conditions. Sera expected for a moment to enter a walkway to the beach or some forest path at the end of the stairs. Instead a dark, heavy, wooden door opened into another tunnel, only much wider and better illuminated than the others below. Looking more closely, she saw it was a huge, open space like a parking lot or some big, flat ground enveloped by round, white walls and oval ceilings.

Sera's back was aching and she had to stop for a little while, resting her backpack on the ground. Clara walked on, through the open space where a much warmer light than below in the tunnels was dispersed, which made her eyes squint a little like sunlight would. Standing there, at the top of the stairs, in the door opening, on the edge of another unknown world, Sera was touched by the familiarity.

It was a strange empty space, made out of a solid, white material. There were no air boosters, but the air was breathable. The open space seemed to serve no other function than to be a kind of courtyard to a group of smaller houses, which showed some of their facades at the end of the dusty, sandy ground. The space looked desolate, abandoned by victims of the war and yet on the dusty ground there were vague indications of footsteps, creating many paths and marks. It was a place of many visitors, but invisible to most like so many other things in the Underground. A world of wandering ghosts. For a brief moment, she thought she heard the voices of a great gathering in the center of the white yard. She could smell the heat of the big crowd, and hear the shouts and noises of their beating warm bodies. Then she looked up to find Clara standing in front of a house.

It was then Clara turned around to look for Sera. Clara was surprised to find Sera so far back. She waited for Sera to catch up and soon they both stood in front of Clara's house, a light red and brown building which stretched itself beyond the white walls of the enclosed space.

## XII

Three-story high, Victorian style, with little bay windows and towers, it rose like a small castle in the far end of the strange, white bubble, which lay as a sheltering sky over the top of the house. The exterior of the house was painted red, and the edges of the glass windows and the front door a rich brown color with a tint of red in it. Sera wondered if it had been painted recently. It looked so freshly new, with its shiny walls and its uncommon glass windows. Like the cottage made of bread, cakes and sugar, it tempted her to explore its many rooms and satisfy her hunger for a home, now that she had none. She realized she had not seen a real house for a long time. It felt like she had been lost for the longest time, with no hope of finding a friendly soul to give her shelter. Walls and tunnels, as far as the eye and body could reach, seemed to be the only architecture in this world. Now, she finally saw a house again like the one she had lived in with her mother, like her grandparents' house. She felt herself stepping back into a time of her childhood, she wished had been different. Could she ever help change the ways of her family?

A small, rickety staircase with steep steps led to the house. The front door had a heavy, metal door handle, which didn't serve its purpose properly. It took such labor to get it open that once inside the house it felt good to sit down in one of the armchairs that had been put in the large reception room. Here a huge, oval mirror with wooden carvings of faces, flowers and leaves floated above an old dresser and tempted her to look more closely. There were old metal hooks with little faces for the coats. The strange thing about the door handle, Sera soon discovered, was that from inside the house, it was light as a feather to open.

The walls of Clara's house had been painted in the most wonderful colors, often dressed with wallpaper; there were colors of green, blue, purple, yellow, and orange. In the bathroom someone had painted fish, seaweed and other ocean animals on all of the walls, and some of the fish touched the ceiling, which gave a sense of being under water.

Sera recalled the many times she and her three classmates in the 7th grade had taken the train to

go snorkeling in the preserved marine area of Goat Island where she had almost touched the shiny scales of the fish that in that haven knew no enemies. The place would always be full of people, but once she was in her wet suit and snorkel gear, moving through the strange element, she forgot about the commotion above and there was only herself and the world of the inhabitants of the sea. For a brief moment, she became an explorer of a world that wasn't usually accessible, which she only watched from the outside, seeing nothing but its surface. But with her snorkel gear and practice in holding her breath for a long time, she could for one special moment embody the same grace and freedom as its dwellers.

Sera immediately felt at home in Clara's big, old house. Clara gave her the lavender room on the third floor where the top part of the walls tilted and a window faced the big, white space outside. It smelled of something sweet and the color pleased her. It had been one of her favorite colors for as long as she could remember. The room was sparsely furnished with a single bed, a small night table, a light yellow dresser and a chair. There was no computer, no clocks, no radio or TV set. Modern time didn't exist here. Sera quickly noticed that she felt at peace, not deprived of anything as she would have imagined.

"Make yourself at home, sweetie", Clara said as she helped Sera with her big backpack. "Let me know if you need anything. And come down when you are ready and have a cup of tea, and I will introduce you to the rest of the gang."

"Thank you. How can I pay you for all of this?" Sera said, feeling in debt to this strange new woman in her life.

Everything happened so quickly that it was hard to follow what to do next. She felt like she was led by some other force far greater than hers and there was little she could do, but let go and be led. It was a strange feeling, not comforting, but nevertheless there was a lightness in her body. Would she have anything to fear? If she did, could she do anything about it but face it when it materialized before her?

"Don't worry, right now. Let's just see if you like it here. I will let you know if I need anything when that time comes. Besides, I am sure there are things you can share with us, which will make everything worth while for all of us," Clara said and winked warmly as she left Sera for herself.

Sera fell down on the bed with a swoop and felt the softness and comfort of it. For the first time since the voices appeared to her, Sera started thinking of what they might be telling her, to get a sense of the reality they presented to her. She had been so afraid that they would show up again, and that they would leave her beyond any form of control. Doru had told her that she had a gift, but she had felt it a curse. Now, she thought maybe the voices were there to help her. It seemed that she had been protected in some way. First there was George who had helped her, when she got lost in the path system and strained her foot. Then Charlie and Benji in the prison, and Selma and her had been

released without a court case or anything. Who was to tell why they had let them go so quickly? It seemed these people had no inhibitions. There was an idea of something, which they seemed to hold onto so tightly as if it represented the deepest of faiths, the greatest of ideals. And now there was Clara, who had come out of nowhere, offering her a place to stay when she needed it the most.

Downstairs in the spacious, olive green living room Clara had prepared a big evening tea party; lined up on the big oak table were china, a great teapot, cups, and bowls all decorated with the same flowers and berries, and dishes stacked with nuts, cookies and buns. Like everything else in the house, there was enough for everybody. The first member of the house she met was Kali, the house cat, who entered the living room and purred as Sera stroked her. Kali reminded her of Ea, her own cat, who would walk into a room and greet any person with a nudge or a caress. She had the same white throat as Ea and some gray in her black and brown spotted fur. Kali had green eyes and her claws were long and eager to play. Ea didn't have much of a temper, and would never play very much.

One of the other residents soon showed up, a tall, skinny man with heavy eyelids and eyes that seemed to pop out of his face, appearing at once curious and sad. There were no external parts of him that appealed to her senses, his large hands and feet were out of proportion, his hair thin and unwashed, his lips and skin dry, but she still felt at ease in his company. Home had so many faces. His name was Alfred and he spoke with slowness and eloquence, which emanated presence and genuineness. And she wanted to know about him, about this place and its dwellers.

"I have lived here for a couple of years," he answered when she asked.

He didn't seem to want to tell more about himself after that. The house and its inhabitants remained a mystery until much later, when all three of them had sat down and begun the tea party, and Clara started telling the story about the white bubble and her beloved house.

It was just before the war that somebody had thought of extending the underground tunnels and corridors. The plan was to create a smaller market and shopping mall in the heart of Greenwich Village, where she lived; the way it had been done in other parts of Manhattan. The workmen had started their project and the entrepreneurs had started taking over the buildings which were located in the new mall area. Clara's house was on the list of houses which had to be demolished in order for the mall to take form. She succeeded in keeping them off her doorstep for a long time. She wasn't about to lose her house too. Her husband had passed away that same year. The doctors hadn't been able to save him from the cancerous cells eating their way in his belly. Clara had watched him literally fading away before her eyes. She wasn't to let that happen to their house too, with all the memories and his spirit still present. She felt safe in that strange house with its thin walls, bad pipes and old, outdated heating system, which she eventually learned to fix herself, when she was left alone.

Clara and her husband had for many years rented out the top floor, making a little extra that

way. But then the upstairs neighbors moved away, believing that soon they wouldn't have a choice as the entrepreneurs came more and more often knocking on the door with their persistent business proposals, raising their prizes, wallets and voices more each time. Clara knew there wasn't much they could do without her consent, and so didn't concede, unbendable. For more than a month the house was quiet, and she walked through it, feeling it longed to be filled, lived in. As time went by, she lost more and more of her energy and liveliness. She probably would have given in to the businessmen, to avoid their daily appearances, and the sadness that seemed to pervade every space in the house, if it hadn't been for her first visitor.

One early morning, she found a homeless cat sitting on her doorstep. God had sent her a friend to watch over her. She invited the cat in, fed her and spoke kindly to her. She named her Kali. The cat's big, round jade eyes, its stiff, long whiskers, and its calm, confident stride showed the ambivalent character of a kind, merciful destroyer. And Kali had come to her in a time of destruction and transformation. She liked to sit on top of Clara wherever there was a big enough surface for her soft, small body. And they got along from the first day. Kali had come to her in a time of distress, to keep her mind from giving up and going crazy.

Not long after that the war broke out and the mall was no longer first priority in anybody's life; however, the little that was built of it became a shelter to the many people who were escaping the horrors of the air above. At the same time, Clara opened her house for anyone who needed shelter and safety, and soon new people took over finishing the construction outside her house. The mall was never built. Instead, they used the material and skeletons to construct a huge, enclosed space which protected people from the outside and was spacious enough for many people to inhabit. They painted it white in memory of the sunlight outside, which they would have to give up in their lives. They built it so that it covered most small buildings and attached its walls to taller buildings. The bubble was two stories high and soon turned out to be a good place to hold concerts and other great gatherings. For the most part the market place had been left for the neighborhood to administer.

Clara went on to tell Sera that her neighborhood had become the place most people sought refuge during the first year after the outbreak of the shortest and most destructive war in history. Clara and Kali suddenly had a lot of visitors in the big, old house, and it had stayed that way ever since. People of all ages, political, economic and social backgrounds came to her house to find refuge, peace or simply an open community. All of Clara's visitors shared the same longing. They sought to change the world for the better and they wanted to be open to change, whatever it would take from them. And along with being a hostess, Clara learned from the people staying with her, saw how others lived their lives, and listened to their stories that made her sad or happy, but always filled her with humbleness and inspired a new knowledge in her.

"It was indeed a time of transformation for me, greater than any other period of my life," she

said and laughed. "But then again, don't we always feel life only gets richer and fuller, the further along we get with it?"

By the time Clara had finished her story, they were all there, the dwellers of Clara's oasis. So many strange, mild faces. Where did they come from? How did she open her house and how did people find their way? Sera wondered and soon the answers came clearly to her, as if she had always known about the makings of time and the higher planes of life. Knowing and seeing was more than using her brain cells. It arose from somewhere in her body. Inside and yet outside of it. As if she could tap into some other source she was connected to. She treasured this new discovery like a valuable gift. Maybe it had always been like that, only now she had recognized it and was learning how to use it.

Alfred, Tony, Millie, Louise and Max; they were all there. The candles Clara had lit and put on the table illuminated their faces. It had never been a dark house, but with the artificial lighting outside in the bubble, very little light reached the inner rooms. The candles made up for the missing light and brought warmth to the place. Sera looked at the people shyly. Just across from her was a young girl, Millie, years younger than Sera. She wore her clothes loosely, hiding a body gaunt and thin from malnutrition. Mia used to treat women suffering from eating disorders, but Sera had a feeling this was not self-inflicted. Sera remembered coming as a child to the clinic where Mia worked, with its bare, white walls, occasionally decorated with bright colored pictures, a framed photograph or a piece of sculpture. In the waiting room, just outside of her mother's office, pale women sat, wearing unbefittingly large clothes that covered what was left of their bodies, and an exaggerated layer of makeup that made their faces shiny, hiding away the paleness of death.

Millie had come only a week ago, Clara told her. No more was said about her story and Sera didn't have the courage to ask any further. She just remembered the things that weren't always appropriate to talk about and noticed that the girl had a hard time looking into anyone's eyes, her attention span short and her breathing abrupt. It was as if the memory of being unsafe controlled her whole body. For a moment, the two young women scanned each other curiously and fearfully under the safe embrace of Clara.

Max, a middle-aged man with gray hair and a long reddish beard, stayed in a corner by himself, avoiding a proper introduction from Clara.

"He is losing his memory," Clara told her. "He remembered too much of the past and something just snapped. He has his moments of clarity, but who wants to remember one's past if it has no happy moments in it. Then again forgetting one's memories may leave no room for the present either."

Clara smiled. Her face lit up from sheer joy.

Tony was the only one, Sera quickly took to liking. When Clara had introduced them to one

another, they sat down and exchanged stories. After the war, he had come from Italy on one of the many boats heading over the Atlantic. He had meant to go to Canada where they had not been affected by the biological warfare, but then, only a few days after he had landed, he had received an offer he couldn't resist and fate brought him further on into the heart of the American east coast. Tony was a short, well-built man, balding slightly at the temples and the top of his head. If his jeans and worn-out sweater had been exchanged for black or brown loose clothes, he could easily have been taken for a monk or some otherworldly man. In Clara's house, everybody received the warmest hospitality.

Later in the evening at the dinner table, another man joined them. He was dressed all in orange, and had hair to his shoulders, and darker skin than usual, and laughed with a whisper. His name was Rami and he was a traveler. He lived a monk-like life of chastity and mindfulness. He lived off what he could sell or trade for a bed and food with the people he met on his way; he sold astrological or numerological readings, jewelry of his own design and making, lessons in meditation, healing, and ancient herbal medicine. He had traveled from one end of America to the other three times. He had been "almost everywhere" he told them with his whispering laughter, and seen "things that couldn't be grasped if you hadn't been there". He had not traveled as far as to "the outskirts of the world" as he called Aotearoa. It was too far away for him. He would have to walk and sail with the kind of money he had, but he had heard stories about that little piece of heaven.

Late that evening, the same day she had met Clara on the train and been introduced to all of Clara's friends and room-mates, Sera fell exhausted onto her new little bed, staring bewildered into an unfamiliar, crack-less ceiling. Clara soon knocked on the door and entered.

"I hope you are comfortable, my dear", she said and smiled. "It has been a long day. But I just want to invite you to one of our big parties which is soon, while I remember to do so. It's kind of a neighborhood gathering, but people from all over the island come. It has become pretty popular, like those parties the Ustodians have, I've been told."

"You know anything about them?" Sera asked and made room for Clara to sit down next to her on the bed.

"I hear stories here and there. I know people who work for them. They keep to themselves, and make their appearances, but not many people really know what goes on behind their doors. They do a good job, keeping this city alive and well. The only thing is that I object to certain policies they have, if you know what I mean," Clara smiled and winked.

"I believe that wars are over for now, the big wars anyway, which leaves us space to deal with the internal ones, don't you think? There isn't much else to do when buried under the ground, away from the great outdoors, is there?"

Sera nodded and thought of the prison walls and the strange Keepers, who maintained the space.

They were of a different world too. The Underground world was divided into so many different layers that it made her dizzy. When would she come to the end of them? And what would she find there?

"Thank you for having me here. I will definitely stay for the party. When is it?" Sera asked.

"The day after tomorrow," Clara answered and helped her get under the covers and turn out the light.

"You remind me of my grandma Ea, she used to do that when I was little," Sera whispered to Clara, as she stood in the doorway.

"Some time, I'd love to hear about her, now sleep tight, sweetie."

o o o o

Hiding behind the great square pillar, where he had a good view of what went on in the 43rd cross-town tunnel, leading to the Ustodians' headquarters, his mind rested for a moment on her face and eyes. The way they moved with such longing and pleasure when they made love. She had opened up so quickly to his touch. A woman more powerful than he had ever experienced was awakening before his eyes. He hadn't seen her for a long time, he realized. Things were moving fast, important connections were made and their energy work was progressing extensively. George was deciding on taking new turns in their work. They had finally been given some privileges, and he let himself be carried by their potential flow.

Albert was a new contact he had made. They had a mutual arrangement. Albert worked inside the headquarters as one of many counselors and knew things about the Ustodians, which were kept from most people. Albert's wife was sick, suffering from severe depressions, which gave her skin and serious stomach problems. Doru went to see her twice a week to teach her the ancient ways of healing and also did healing work on her. She had forgotten why she initially became depressed, and lived her life behind the four walls of their apartment, in constant fear of life and slowly losing her memory. Often she would forget the names of her friends, the words for her kitchen tools, or where she had put her things. Doru diagnosed privately that there was a deep yearning in her to be her true self which she had never met, and as a result the world was a dreadfully lonely and sad place to her. She had separated herself from what was most dear to her and was struggling with the consequences of this.

Doru taught her about yoga and it quickly became clear to him that together they could bring balance back into her life and being. She had a great will. What had been forgotten was to be found again. In return for the treatment of Gwen, Albert gave warnings, and delivered his reports on the society and actions of the Ustodians, filling in the gaps. Albert had also helped Soledad get the job in

the administrative department. It was the closest they had been able to get to the powerful energy field of the Ustodians. Albert only gave as much information as he was comfortable with.

Doru spotted Albert far down the tunnel. He walked with his back hunched over as if a huge burden was weighing him down. When Albert came up to where Doru stood, Doru noticed furrows marked in Albert's forehead like deep cracks in dry desert mud.

"Gwen is very ill today, I'm worried. And I don't have time tonight. I am sorry, Doru," the older man looked at Doru with concern.

"I know you are doing a great job. Soledad fit right in at the department. It's good to have her there," Albert continued.

Doru hadn't told him anything specific about their work, and Albert was rarely present when Doru treated his wife. It was strange to hear this from him. He hadn't expected him to have any interest, but it pleased Doru. It felt good to be heard and seen in all the madness of secrecy and fear.

"You do what you have to do, Albert. I can go and see Gwen tonight if you like, and I can meet you after the Greenwich Market the day after tomorrow," Doru said.

Albert nodded.

"Good, tell her I am working late tonight and will be home all day tomorrow", he whispered and quickly went on his way again.

It was late to pay a house visit and the moon was full tonight. He guessed it had sent her off into the astral world as smoothly as running water. The yin energy of the moon triggered her, and the feminine aspects would take over. Albert and Gwen didn't live far from the Ustodians' headquarters, just a little southwest off Park Avenue in one of the newly renovated and spacious hitech apartments. It was obvious that they were privileged citizens. And yet like everybody else they didn't have access to the sunlight, their water supply was scarce, and late at night they had to use candles when the electricity was shut off. It was all computerized in the newer apartments, and nothing escaped the programmers once a building was systemized. Doru was lucky to have found an apartment building which hadn't been systemized. The programmers were only now beginning to work that far up on the island. Inwood had been the furthest nook, which nobody had bothered keeping an eye on. It had meant peace and quiet to be himself and do what he wanted without too much difficulty. Now that was changing too.

Doru walked down the street tunnels, avoiding the trains and the crowded areas. It reminded him of his first years in New York, finding his way around in the dark, deserted passages, which were yet to be reconstructed then. Everything had seemed so simple, so dream-like that he had never considered the steps he had taken, the traveling, and the scars of the war. He had been all youth and courage. He had never gone back to Baia Mare and the remains of his home country then. Now that

all of his family had passed away, there was no point. Did he ever imagine then that he wouldn't return to his roots, when he first arrived to the Underground streets that were undamaged by the calamities of war?

Near his parents' country house, there had been a little pond, which he used to sit at as a child, before they sent him off to boarding school, and before he became absorbed in the world of books and study. Here, at night or at the crack of dawn, when the world was all still, in a different, alternate state, he would find his way through the emotions and fears to a place of perfect emptiness. It was safe and calm there. He had all the space he needed to unfold like a butterfly. Here he used to imagine a different world, in which people were wise and joyful, and special gifts like the ones that were reserved to witches and wizards were for everyone. They could all communicate beyond the limitations of speech and emotion. The evolution of the human body had expanded beyond the common understanding, and time traveling was no longer a novelty. Those were his dreams as a boy, and so far he hadn't lost them, he had regained them after periods of disbelief, and his findings had only made them stronger. He had found a path that made sense, he had found his pond again in the shape of passages, labyrinths and train tracks.

He arrived at Albert and Gwen's building and stood for a while outside its main entrance, which was merely a set of stairs leading up to level 1. The Underground passages, the human-made structure connecting everything in this world, were always level 0, zero. Nothing before the beginning. Like it was with the circle of life, the roundness of the planet. Albert had given him a special authorization pass under the name of William Byrne, so that he could enter the building anytime without leaving any visible traces behind. It was nearing 23:00. They would soon shut down the electricity, and he would have to think of a way to get out of the building without drawing any attention to himself. He didn't really want to do that, so he would probably have to spend the night in one of their spare rooms. He was alarmed by this without knowing why, and decided to stay alert.

They lived on level 12 with what would have been a magnificent view of a deep sky and the pregnant moon, but who was to tell, except those who had already pulled down their protection and disbeliefs. Doru knocked on the door a couple of times before she cracked it open.

She was a tiny woman, with little feet and nimble hands. Her face was pale and her body thin and weak looking. Her appearance hid well an inner strength that went beyond most people's conception of what was possible. He saw it now. The full moon had its full effects on this awakening being, born of and led toward the Divine.

"Doru," she whispered, surprised.

It seemed that behind those eyes of sadness, a determined smile tried to fight its way to the surface.

"Hi Gwen, Albert asked me to stop by. May I come in?"

She opened the door wider and let him in, putting her hand on his shoulder as if she needed something to hold onto, when pulling the door open.

"I am not feeling too good," she said and swallowed.

"I think you look beautiful, Gwen. You are learning to open up. I think, we are ready to make new goals for you," Doru spoke softly, feeling how her energy responded well to his. The supple energy of the moon guided him a little.

She smiled, almost smirked.

"Have you done any of the visualizations, Gwen?" he asked, ignoring her playfulness.

They walked through the big living room, which the small corridor led into. It was a wide spacious room with a gentle breeze passing through it. Depending on one's preference it was either warm or cool. There were no plants, just wide, simple furniture, with a couple of book shelves with mostly knickknacks and a few popular books. Hiding behind a bowl was the book he had given her. He knew their bedroom was located further to the right, and to the left the kitchen and dining room. They always kept to the living room, which had the most open floor and the computer for the music.

She walked slowly, her hands and arms dangling like rubber bands from her upper body. He walked up next to her and guided her with his hands to carry her body more straightly. His hands had guided her back many times before, but that night it was different. Transformed into a woman of a different shape and intention, she turned and took his hand up to her lips, looking straight into his eyes. Doru was taken aback by the new arrangement of power. Kali, the great Goddess of destruction, love and alchemy lurked in the room. Her blue, clear eyes led him into a different place, a world of violence and sorrow. He studied her with interest and ignored her desire to love and destroy. He couldn't show her that part. It was dangerous grounds with different game rules. Her hand still held his hand for a long time. His silence and gaze made her linger.

"Albert will be out all night, come and show me the yoga you do in bed, please!" she spoke and pulled his hand toward the bedroom door.

"Gwen that you have to practice with Albert when the moon wanes again. I think you are drunk from its brightness," Doru said and pulled his hand to.

"Are you up for some practice tonight, or have the demons gone into your beautiful head? Perhaps it might be better for me to get going before they turn off the electricity."

Gwen sat down exhausted on the floor, her smile faltering and her eyes stiffening.

"Don't go", she whispered slowly, repeatedly before her voice gained clarity.

Doru stayed with his heart in his hands, and let his body fall to the ground, listening for her voice.

"When I was a little girl, I would stare into the air for hours. If I am full of demons, they have always been there since my girlhood was taken away from me. For the first time in my life, Doru, I

feel like a woman. Don't take that away from me. You make me feel like this world of chaos and darkness is worth it all; that between all the thousands of layers of matter this world is created on, there is something worth being whole for, something worth fighting for. I am not really a fighter, though, and maybe, you're right, it's all this business of the moon, but I want to be a woman tonight. Not this mere being in a world of enclosure. I want to be the woman you see in all women, the woman who is the Goddess you dream about, the woman who will save this world from despair again and again", Gwen paused and looked at Doru, who had sat down in front of her.

When he remained motionless and quiet, she continued:

"I had a dream not so long ago. It was terrifying and yet strangely enticing. You know, as if something intimate had crept up on me that I didn't recognize at first, since it had no familiar shape.... A woman comes to me in my bedroom. I wake up, feeling a chilly wind in the room. She is standing at the door. She looks like an Asian woman I used to work with many years ago. We only knew each other for a short period, since she didn't stay at the workplace for long. We never heard what had happened; one day she was no longer there. She walks toward me. There is nothing human about her. It is as if her feet don't touch the ground, and she is floating. Her skin is very pale, almost as transparent as the wind, and I feel her presence rather than see it. She speaks in slow, short sentences. She shows me her wrists for a brief moment. I see the marks of cuts on her veins. It is brutal. She says it doesn't hurt anymore, she is a spirit now."

"Look me into my eyes and you will see.

"I look and see nothing, a dark grayish mush of color. There is no beauty in there. I wonder if that is where we go, when we leave our bodies to rest. It is where she has gone. It is terrifying. Her breath is dead, yet it expels a chill that touches everything, makes time stand still, awakes what needs awakening, and puts to sleep what deserves only sleep. She smiles and disappears for a moment, to reappear on the other side of the bed, where my sleeping husband is. It's unbearable, she only brings sad visions."

"Something horrible will happen to some of your family, Gwen, in a month from now, December 20th, when the sun and moon are in conjunction, the spirit says."

Gwen looked at Doru with apprehension and mumbled.

"My family passed away a long time ago, and so did the seed inside of me. All I have left are the people around me who don't really amount to many."

"Take care what you say Gwen, our truest family is not necessarily the one we are born into. Finding that very special, spiritual family is one of the most beautiful things you can encounter in life, along with finding your soul-mate," Doru said and felt a little melancholic.

"Well, I don't know, Doru, but she said more after that: You may be able to stop this from happening, but it isn't likely. You lack clarity, she said and looked at me with concern as if she didn't

have much confidence in me. It is crucial that you stay on this path, don't give up, she said before she vanished. It was so crystal clear, so real, and it wasn't until I sat up again awaking from the dream that I knew it had been a dream, though I still wonder," Gwen said, her voice quivering.

"I wrote it all down, which is why I remember it so well. I forget so easily."

Like a bird above its prey, silence hovered in the room after that.

"What do I do?" she then whispered, sounding like the spirit of her vision, spreading chills with her mere breath.

"I think you already know, Gwen. You keep your mind open, and watch out for when you can help. Follow your intuition, like a true woman," Doru said and looked into her eyes for a long time.

She soon smiled again, and took his hand.

"I like to be called woman, no one ever calls me that. I never imagined myself becoming a woman when I was a kid, and when I turned into a woman I felt more like a girl. Now that I have lost my ability to carry any seeds, I feel that girl is coming back again. Without my consent this time."

"Your gifts as a woman will come back to you in their time," Doru said quietly and added with a whisper:

"Now, dance for me, woman. Show me, dance your heart away. That is what I want from you tonight, that is how you will make love to me."

At first she listened, even long after he had stopped talking. She listened carefully. For a sound, a note, a state of being. Then she walked to the computer and put music on. It had a rhythmic part to it, a woman's soft voice, bells, a guitar, drums and choir voices. She started moving slowly, feeling the ground underneath, building up heat and desire for the depth of the music. Doru watched her, and she looked upon him, her eyes fixed on his gaze, his being. She was dancing for him, for life. She moved faster now, continuing in round, soft circles and movements. The moon was embracing her being, making her heart receptive. She was safe in that moment. She could be a woman before him without pain or expectations.

For two hours straight, she danced for him. When she stopped, she let out a big sigh, gliding slowly to the ground, exhausted and purged. A woman without a trace of guilt or shame, smiling as a newborn. He carried her to her bed where he laid her down, and watched her for a while. She was deep asleep. He went back to the couch in the living room. He didn't sleep much, moved by her dancing; her small, delicate feet moving with nimbleness, her breast rocking like waves, her hands playfully touching the air and her eyes two fires reading his heart. It was 4:00 am, when he decided to take off. Gwen slept soundly, quietly. Albert had still not returned.

Outside the building in the Underground, it was very quiet. The electricity hadn't returned, so he stepped carefully into the tunnels where the faint night-lights cast intimidating shadows on

ceilings and walls. He walked to the west side, following the 42nd tunnel, where the breath of the city slowly came to. A sleeping bear slowly waking from its hibernation. At 5:00 hours, the lights came back and the trains were put into motion, their sounds waking the early risers from their sleepwalking. Like in a fairy tale, in which a kingdom is awakened from a long spell, the city of the Underground woke before his eyes. There was no slow advance of things like in the world above; it all happened at once. When the machines started rolling again, people were put into motion too. Loudspeakers, trains, shops, lights had all become a choir of activity to which people quickly adjusted, while making their way forward toward another sun- and moonless day.