

Part 5

*She is the source of the Word, for from her,
by means of successive transformations, the word came forth.
She is the Creator and creation in one,
the cause of the existence and dissolution of the worlds.*

Jean Marques-Riviere

XIII

On the morning of the Greenwich Village gathering, people from Clara's house and the neighboring houses in the bubble were busy preparing for the night's big event. There were banners to be made, food to be cooked, music to be arranged, chairs, tables and platforms to be set up. From her window, Sera could follow everything that went on in the big square. There were no disruptions; among the working people everything had a natural flow.

She had slept for many hours and had woken enticed and soft, as if she had been dancing all night, her body remembering the movements to the rhythm of a beautiful piece of music that lifted her to where the heart expressed its secrets, its magic. It had lifted her to a higher place where there was no harm or fear. She thought of Doru; her wonderful lover. He had a heart that held so much she couldn't grasp. She wouldn't be surprised to see him show up to the party tonight. He seemed to know most things about this city. He was the kind of person everybody liked, even if he mostly preferred to spend his time by himself.

Clara noticed her sitting in the window and waved to her from outside the house. Soon she would go down, only she just wanted to savor the moment of the dream-like state she was in a little while longer. They were unfolding tables and chairs and putting them up in the end of the big square closest to Clara's house. They put tablecloths and candles on them. There would be some food available, and people would bring their own too. Clara hadn't told her much about the gathering, only that people would read, give lectures and play music. And there would be stands from which people would be selling things, food and services like in a market place. Sera looked forward to seeing what new sides or shades of the Underground city she would find. She felt safe with Clara. It was like being in her family again, in the big old house on the hill, where Ea and Mihai lived for many years.

There was a knock on her door and Rami entered. He was wearing another orange robe. This was a little finer, made of silk and embroidered on the sleeves, the collar and at the bottom of the pants. He had braided and combed his long, black hair. It shone as if sunlight danced on it.

"Hi, princess," he said. "Won't you come and help us? We need some creative inspiration from you. You are part of our group now."

"I am coming, I just wanted to enjoy this moment. Come over here and see."

Sera was sitting on the slim windowsill with her face pressed up against the glass. At home, she would sit in her window for hours, watching the world outside. There would always be something new to look at, different colors or shapes; when another cycle of seasons had passed, she would have forgotten the deep red of the Pohutukawa trees' flowers, and how the new, warm winds played with the ocean, and how green the earth would look. They would surprise her again and again, the textures of the living, which could change so rapidly. One hour of the day never looked alike in "the land of the long white cloud", which Hine-te-aparangi, the Maori wife of the legendary navigator Kupe exclaimed, when they saw Aotearoa from their boats.

Rami came over to where she sat. He walked up next to her. He smelled of sandalwood. A familiar smell from her childhood. Everything about him was very pleasant and benign.

"Look up there, where the column is, round about in the middle of the ceiling," Sera said and pointed.

Her window went parallel with some parts of the ceiling of the hall. About twenty feet from her window, there was an opening in the roof by a piece of thick plywood, which looked like a cheap and quick attempt to repair a leak. Rami spotted the hole and soon after they both saw a pair of wings stirring. Where the wood didn't touch the top of the ceiling, there was a gap just big enough for a bird's nest.

"Other beings are finding a place to rest under Clara's rooftop. I've been watching her for a long time now. She definitely has chickens in there, though it's a strange time of year for birds to be nesting."

"I've seen much stranger things on some of my trips through the Middle East and Asia. Animals have their ways of surviving like we do, I guess. Only, I guess, this time in history most of the damage was done to humanity. It seemed that someone was watching over the animals or perhaps they turned out to be better survivors than us."

"Where were you during the week of the war?" Sera asked, watching the bird fly out of the hole.

She had been at home, a baby of three, far-away from any dangers of contamination. If the Americans had decided to throw a bomb with a larger capacity, there would probably not have been much world left for animals or human beings. Sera felt a shiver go through her body.

"I was in the Himalayas, in one of the small villages high up in places in the mountains, which have been kept sacred for many centuries. Very few people know of their existence and since they have been so well protected from the rest of the world, they have kept the old traditions alive and have managed to live in conditions that keep man in balance with nature, soul and body. They say that they can live for hundreds of years up there. I think the sacred energy of the place protected us from the harm of the bomb, but the world below was destroyed. I stayed with the people there for a couple of years afterwards, but then the sadness of the world became too much. I felt I had to go and do my share to help the ones that had not been as fortunate as I. That was when I started my travels and I haven't stopped since. Living there for about five years gave me back the vitality and vigor of my youth, and I was ready to enter a world

of devastation and loss. After a while of traveling in the new world, I discovered that it wasn't all sadness; in the desert of mankind a flower of hope with such immense petals in beautiful, rich colors was growing stronger and bigger every day," Rami said.

He spoke with softness and joy. He had no anger or sadness. Even when he said words like 'devastation' or 'loss', there was no sense of pity or anguish. In his eyes the world was perfect, everything happened for a reason, everything was part of a greater scheme and there was a flower to find wherever you went. To him living in the Underground world of business and air boosters or in the great Himalayas among a wise and harmonic people made no difference, either way there was beauty.

"You know it's really very simple, only a matter of focus and peace within, and that is the true paradise of this world ... well, what do you say about helping out. We have a big event coming up, young lady. Let's talk more about all of this some other day. You are curious about life, I like that," Rami said and smiled.

Sera smiled back.

"Okay," she said, not knowing what else to say.

There was a world of stories in his eyes that she longed to know about, that she longed to experience. She felt so young in his company.

They worked all afternoon on the preparations and had a late lunch in the big living room. Sera and Rami had done the cooking. There were fried vegetables in curry-spiced sauce, rice, bread and salads. The smell of the curry reached every corner of the first floor of the house, and it called people to the dinner table, so that when they started carrying in the pots, pans and bowls, the dwellers of the house were already seated at the table.

That afternoon there were more people than usual, visitors were arriving early and some of them, personal friends of Clara's had sneaked into the house, knowing about its hospitality. Even Kali had entered the room, appreciating the finer arts of Rami's cooking. Like most pets in this world Kali had grown accustomed to fake meat and protein-enriched vegetables. Kali was the first pet Sera had seen in the Underground world, and Clara had told her that most pets had not survived the first years after the war. People had first and foremost saved people. And there were regulations about owning pets and like most other rules in the Underground, they were strict. Very few people if any were allowed to own pets. Sera told her about the bird, they had seen from her window, and remembered again the world outside, where it seemed that life had readjusted and flourished once more. It was true, she had not seen many animals there, a squirrel and a couple of birds, but she believed in what Doru had told her. Life had gone through another cycle up there, and it would flourish with or without man's interventions or intrusions. He longed to be part of that world, he had told her. Now, having lived in the Underground for only a year, she knew what he and many others were longing for.

Outside, people were coming from all ends and corners of the space, flocking in like animals to an oasis in the desert. Rami held her hand and they moved through the crowd. The tables had been turned into stands, from which people sold music, books, roots and vegetables, prepared foods and nuts. There were small statues, incense, tobacco and herb teas, and other strange-looking plants that smelled strong; there were perfumes in strangely shaped bottles and pipes.

Rami took her to his table, where they unloaded his bags, which were full of jewelry, cards and gemstones. Like most other people at the Greenwich Market who owned small businesses, Rami didn't belong to any monetary system, but relied solely on people paying for the things through his website. It was the only way to have a small business these days. He had a small palm pad, through which people could pay him, using their ID-cards. It worked slowly and demanded patience, but this way, he could travel the world and sell his stuff wherever he went. Most sellers had these computer pads, which they lent to one another, handing them from table to table. Clara had two computers available for common use at the market, and there was a steady stream of people lining up to pay for their purchases there too.

She stayed with Rami for a couple of hours, making sure people paid for the stuff they purchased. Then she took off to explore the market on her own. The great space, which would usually be quiet and bare, now buzzed with liveliness; there were people everywhere, hundreds of them, talking, drinking, walking and eating. And musicians were using the platforms, which they had put up with such effort hours before. Later the speakers would take over the platforms. Sera thought of history classes and the many eras of mankind; this was like time-traveling, and much different to being in one of her visions.

She followed the straight path along the stands to the end and walked back again. They had not filled out all of the available space, so she could move a little beyond the stands and look at it from a distance. That was when she noticed the tree that people had created; the path of stands was the trunk and the many groups of people were the branches, twigs, leaves and roots. The roots didn't look much different from the branches, both reaching, like fingers and arms, toward a life-giving element.

At home they had a great Milk Tree, which oozed a milky-like fluid when you cut into its bark. She used to climb in it all the time as a child. It was like going on a trip, seeing the world from a different place and with other eyes. The perspective of her home changed, and for an hour or two she would turn her gaze down and not up as usual. When she grew older, she would stay on the ground and look admiringly at the body and shape of the tree. Her favorite part was where the trunk turned into branches. That was where the transition from stability to growth and sprouts took place. This was where all the riches of the soil had accumulated until they burst into a different kind of growth, spreading and reaching out for the nourishment of the sky. This was where she had sat when she was a child, on the springboard of the tree, where the immense vitality coming from the ground blossomed into branches that carried the energy of the sun.

Sera started moving back into the crowd, thinking she wanted to find Clara or some of the other

people from the house. She found Rami sitting at his stand by himself. There were less people at the stands now.

"Hi Sera. You came just in time. I was thinking of closing the shop for a little while. The talks are coming on. It is eight o'clock," Rami said and got up from his seat.

"You are leaving your stuff here?" Sera asked in wonder.

"Yep, I will just leave a note. I have my own safety system, which works well, and if something gets stolen, hey then it's because I don't need it. The world is full of so much stuff anyway, Sera," he said and let her know with his smile that she didn't have to worry.

Sera nodded and smiled, thinking the strangeness of his logic made sense.

"This is the best part of the evening, I think. The educational part. Speakers from all over the island come here for this night. You know, old teachers, priests, politicians and scholars who have decided to stay away from the media, but still ache to talk about their thoughts and ideas," Rami said and took her hand.

They walked over to the nearest platform, where a rotund man with a big beard, wavy, gray hair and round, sniggering eyes stood. A big crowd of excited and attentive faces lingered around him. Sera let herself be absorbed by the gathering and was carried away by the spokesperson's talk.

With firm conviction he spoke of the free will of all beings in this world, which a lot of great philosophers and anthropologists had talked about for many centuries. He mentioned two men especially, who lived in the 19th century: Charles Darwin, a British naturalist and student of medicine, theology and science, and Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. They both touched upon the subject of free will but from two very different scientific perspectives. The man moved onto other important people in this field, whom Sera hadn't heard about before. When he started discussing individual responsibility, she began to pay more attention. He claimed that every being had been given a free will in order to be able to change the course of his or her life, the turns, the decisions, the makings of it, whether it be full of joy or misery. There was no difference to the opportunities and possibilities of each individual. It was a question of liberation from preformed conditions. If there was a will to change something, it could be done. Transformation wasn't purely a matter of divine intervention. And life wasn't simply something that happened to the individual. It was performed, staged, and written by the individual himself. One could choose to look at it as freedom or prison, negative or positive. The spokesperson claimed that too few people took responsibility for their own lives; instead they chose to look at what they had been given as struggles rather than as gifts that they were allowed to use and benefit from. Life wasn't against them. A greater unity and clarity was omnipresent. He thought it strange that people would choose to look at life as a series of miserable experiences with glimpses of happy moments when it made more sense to think of it as abundant precious moments with periodical challenges that are really signs of how to find joy and balance.

Sera listened to the man with amazement. Twenty minutes later, the next person came onto the little

stage, embraced by the listening crowd. Sera noticed that there were other platforms where the musicians had also been replaced by speakers. This time a woman, with long black hair, long black nails and a slim, long body entered the stage. Her face was equally long and slim, and her eyes were two narrow lines. She read poetry with a deep, sonorous voice. Sera couldn't hear much of what she was reading. There was no microphone, and Rami and Sera were in the back of the crowd.

"Let's go somewhere else, Alfred is going to speak," Rami whispered into her ear.

Alfred stood for a long time in silence on the stage, looking at the small audience in front of him. His eyelids were so heavy that it looked like they were burdened by tears. But once he spoke, she recognized his curiosity, the part of him she liked the best.

"I have come tonight to speak about the mole people. I know some of you know who they are, and perhaps you have lived among them once. Let me just say that I know a little bit about these people. I myself have been granted something better, which I thank the stars for every day, but that will not stop me from speaking for their cause. If we have been deprived of the joys of the sun and worlds above us, it is nothing against what they go through. Our protectors say that we have nothing to worry about, that the situation is under control. And this is news. Just a couple of years ago they would not admit to the existence of the mole people. This doesn't mean though, that anything is being done to better their living conditions."

"They say our world is the safest, cleanest and best protected of them all, but just ten feet below us, another reality has been left for many years, unguarded, unregistered by the authorities. If we want to change things in our world, which isn't that perfect after all, I say we better take our lives in our own hands and start helping each other. Equilibrium can be found. You don't have to be religious to see that! We need to rethink our ways and what we believe to be good and right for us. I am telling you folks, we are part of this society, and we are forming and shaping it every day. I am no educated man, but I know what I feel and see. We need to rethink our ways, start building new bridges. The foundation needs to be renovated, recreated, and we are the foundation, we keep this place going. Not six people who call themselves the Ustodians. We decide whether they will keep running the show for us. Our so-called protectors do very little for us these days. You don't need a microscope to see that. Thanks for you time, people. I wish you peace and goodness!"

Alfred bowed a little and looked at the people around him with a glimpse of a smile appearing on his lips. He had been focused while speaking, and now the muscles in his face relaxed again. He hadn't made a long speech, and yet he had said enough in few, simple words.

People started clapping wildly. The clamor lasted for several minutes, and Sera felt goose bums on her skin. The engagement of these people surprised her. It was so different from the crowds on the trains and at the university that she saw every day. It was a different aspect of the Underground people, which she hadn't seen before. Doru had spoken to her about the soul of groups, people and nations. It wasn't just the

individual, who had a soul; it was also the energy, the integrity formed by two or many more people. Manifestations of the stuff that the soul was made of happened everywhere. Everything vibrated. Everything was energy and had the potential to take part in the higher, Divine structure of the worlds.

She wondered if Doru was somewhere in the crowd. She had forgotten to look for him. She realized she hadn't spoken to him, since she was kicked out by Selma. She had tried to call, but had had no luck. She knew he had started working again with his teaching and had a couple of pupils, who demanded a lot of his time.

"But how do we rethink our ways? What kind of life, but this, is there?" a man in the crowd called out.

Another man who stood near the stage spoke out:

"The biggest changes happen inside first. Just think of the great scientists and new thinkers of the world throughout time, they sat down on their own first, thinking, creating, and reinventing. And they were often unpopular among the people too. I hear what you say, Alfred, it lies in the ways that we have become comfortable with, in our belief systems, which are set and secure ways to deal with things. The world is changing whether we want it or not, always has been, but which way do we want it to go? We do have some say in it too. The Ustodians have helped us a lot, but they have taken a lot away too".

Alfred raised his hand in order to make himself visible to the crowd, and spoke:

"I don't know what to do, that is why I came here tonight to speak, to raise the question that I have heard raised many times at these gatherings, one way or another. Are we happy with the way things are in our world? We might have our reasons and backgrounds, but we also have each other. I see that going to these meetings. We can do a lot better than this. That is all I am saying. Let's just think about these things in our communities. Rethink your lives," Alfred called out loud.

In a brief moment, Alfred was transformed into a man of great stature and confidence by his own message. Sera could almost not recognize him.

"There is a way, Rami," Sera said, thinking of the birds nesting somewhere in the ceiling of the bubble.

Rami looked at her with curiosity. Sera pointed upwards and smiled. Rami looked again, surprised. His thoughts were working.

"Rise above," he said to her.

"Yes and not just in a metaphorical sense," Sera said and laughed a little. The thought of such immense changes, and that she might partake in them, made her light-headed.

Around 22:00, after several different talks and discussion groups, concerning the money system, the shortcomings of the public media, and more poetry readings, things ebbed out a bit. Electricity would go out in an hour and people were starting to bring their stuff together and go back to their neighborhoods.

People were beginning to talk across groups, planning the next gathering. Rami and Sera were both excited about the talks and the crowds. A lot of new thoughts went through their minds. They imagined that was the case with a lot of others.

As people slowly subsided, Rami and Sera felt the tiredness of a long day's work in their bodies. They walked back toward Rami's table.

"Isn't that Sera?" somebody called out and tapped her on her shoulder.

Sera turned to see who was behind her. It was the skinny man with the long face and glasses whom she had been introduced to the first day she had gone to the MOSA center with George.

"Hi, you remember my name," Sera said.

"Yeah, I was hoping to see you again. I'm Michael, by the way," he said and gave her his hand.

"This is Rami," Sera said and felt a little awkward in between the two men, who shook hands.

"I will meet you at the stand, Sera, bye Michael," Rami said and walked on.

"So what brings you to Greenwich Market?" Michael asked.

"Long story, but I became homeless."

"And Clara found you?" Michael asked and smiled.

Sera nodded, surprised.

"Happens to a lot of people. I lived with her for half a year. People who want to know more about life, who go further than what is presented to them by the society, or who have been near the edge of life, find her. She is like a magnet, and she is also a great guide. Did she tell you her story?"

Sera nodded again. A little stunned by the strangeness of things, and the awkwardness she felt toward Michael, who stood there midst all the events with genuine forwardness.

"You know, we have a lot of spare beds at the center too, if you should ever come into another situation," Michael said.

"Thank you," Sera said. "I have to go, the power will go out soon. Rami is waiting for me."

Michael just smiled and embraced her, warmly and fervently. And then she took on her way, back to Rami and the house of Clara and Kali.

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People slowly ebbed from the market following hidden paths, disappearing into their separate places and lives. It had been an incredible night, Doru thought. There had been real engagement and intensity. The Underground dwellers were maturing to take their lives into their own hands, emancipate from their Ustodians. They were ready to think new thoughts, take actions they wouldn't have dreamed of taking before. When people dissipated from the grounds, Doru began to look for Albert. Doru knew that the Underground movements, a small number of individuals, who went against the mainstream of society,

would usually meet here. They were philosophers, not men of action, but they came to the same conclusive thoughts and beliefs as the MOSA group. Doru had been to some of the meetings, as a spokesman for MOSA, which had always been known as a separate group all together. It was at these Underground meetings following right after the Greenwich Market events that the discussions and talks at the Market were being evaluated, and new proposals for action made. However, for a long time, the tendency had been for people to do very little with their abounding words and ideas, which would revive at the next meeting.

More recently, the fear of exposure had grown in the Greenwich Village, and tonight had been canceled for the first time in a very long time. Doru had sensed the uncertainty long before most, and it hadn't come as a surprise to him. In some ways, more happened without a meeting, where words took over too much. It was a good sign. This meant that confrontations would inevitably arise and that was needed to take real action. If there was no pressure from the outside, people would go on discussing their ideas and plans for the future, and soon a different future would overshadow the present without people's real engagement and direction.

He saw Albert coming from the far end of the market space, from the entrance to the Underground tunnels. Doru began walking toward him, along the walls of the strange bubble construction, which reminded him of a space cargo ship that he had seen in old sci-fi movies. He used to watch them as a child, over and over, fantasizing about his own hero actions. They were stories of the pure, innocent mind, and he would still experience that part of himself. It was his secret, his most treasured part. It moved him, gave him freedom to know himself. He had once read somewhere that 'on one's path one should always do what one knows best'.

"Good evening, Albert."

"Hello, I'm sorry, I'm a little late. Everyone has gone home," Albert said and looked at his watch. "I guess the shutdown has sent people away."

"How is everything at home? Is all well?" Doru asked, remembering Gwen's enticing dance.

"We are doing well, Gwen is lightening up. You are helping us tremendously. Well, we don't have much time. Where can we go that is private?" Albert said and looked around the market space.

The stands and platforms hadn't been removed, and the last traces of the big gathering brought a strange air of desertedness to the place; like the remains after a hurricane.

They went to a friend's house. She lived in one of the few houses that had been abandoned at the turn of the postwar era. The house was situated at the very end corner of the bubble. They entered a little front garden, which now only consisted of pale, barren soil, and went inside to the small conference room, which was available for private meetings. Doru thought of the gardens of Aotearoa that Sera had spoken about. He could easily imagine them: the flowers, grass and trees. Children could run and play freely and spontaneously. Lovers could lie in the sun, kissing, feeling open to the beauty of living inside their love; so

lucid because it was all around them. Enveloping them. A memory. He remembered the country he had left. It wasn't that different from what Sera had told him. His memories were clearer than ever, brighter, and closer. One way or another this era of the Underground city would change, and he would see to it that he put all of himself into it. Merging, opening up as to a lover. He had to make love to the world in order to change its ways of thinking, acting and being.

"It doesn't look good. The Ustodians have started moving up north to Washington Heights and Inwood," Albert said and lingered.

"In my neighborhood," Doru replied. "I had my suspicions."

"They're planning a raid on the Greenwich Market, this week."

"Do they know about the different underground movements in this part of town?"

"They may..." Albert answered looking away.

They were both quiet for a long time.

"I'm happy to see that Gwen is growing out of her depressions. I know, she has been ill for many years, and you have felt lost like her. A piece of advice for you, Albert. Share more with her. Don't be afraid to let her in. She is much better now. Break your habits with her," Doru said, holding Albert's gaze.

When Albert left, Doru noticed the quietness in the house. In the middle of their conversation the lights had gone out, and they had lit the few candles put out for them on the black, smooth surface of the only table in the room. Like little flower buds, bright and shiny, they floated in the silent, dark air of the room. They were such a delight to his eye that they made him smile.

In the light from the candles, he went into a spontaneous meditation. In the space he entered there was no up or down, the many colors of the air embraced him, shrouding him in a circle of blue, yellow, green, white and turquoise. He felt like the flowering bud, unfolding after a long time of anticipation, petal by petal under God's sky and sun, inside the soil of his hands, alive, being, growing still, significant in an immense universe of flowers, skies and suns. When he came back to his own body and found himself in the small conference room again, he thought of Albert and Gwen.

He had met them at one of the Greenwich Markets a couple of years back. They were young, wealthy people who stood out in the crowd of alternative people. It was hard not to notice them. They came to buy relics from India and other Far East countries. Gwen was the enthusiast, collecting vases, statues of Gods and Goddesses, pottery, jewelry, while Albert always kept a low profile, always in the background. Already then, Doru had suspected the reason for this. As time slowly shifted everything into its proper place, Doru gained more of Albert's trust and found that he had been right about his premonitions. Without disclosing themselves, they began communicating in codes so that none of them could say for certain that they knew each other. And so for a long time, they avoided conflicting situations, and didn't have to deal with any danger of exposure. Albert had become an important link to understanding the

other side, the Ustodians, and finding a way to bring new thoughts and energy into the part of the Underground which was hidden to most people. Soon, though, Albert shared more and more with Doru.

There were six of them, only one of them had a child, a son who had been born on the day the war broke out. The wife had passed away and the son had survived, but only barely. He had been sickly for years unending. The father was the weak link. He had a dying son to keep him present, searching for other means to deal with the world. Albert knew about these people, they were his employers. Their vision had once been pure, their goals with the city as it fell apart and history again took its turn. They had assimilated into their views upon life as a group and so had the rest of the Underground world. A world without differences, without poverty or wealth, without material worries, without racism or religious disputes, their vision had sounded. That was twenty years ago, time and progress had changed a few things since then. They had abandoned all that threatened the equilibrium of their world, but in the meantime life had moved on, new times were approaching, different forces needed. Their ways were the old ones, the broken and worn ones. How could a group of such intelligence and vision give way to new powers without a feeling of having failed? They had been right about a lot of things, but they had forgotten something, the most sacred part of it all.

Getting to know Albert had been like looking into a magic mirror. The blessing and curse of it both scared and comforted him. He had never known much about the Ustodians, the governors of the city, but it had often occurred to him that the reason why they didn't mingle was fear. He had lived much of his life hiding from exposure, living his path in silent secrecy. He couldn't stand out and claim his freedom in the outside world; the inner one had to do for him. The difference was that his joys were found in the back corners of his being, the Ustodians found theirs in festivities, which were hidden away in the grandeur, physical spaces of the Underground, secluded to all but an inner circle. Doru was finding more and more that he could go anywhere he wanted to go, even to the places of the Ustodians. It was a matter of inner silence and the right tuning.

Doru wrote a note to his friend, explaining to her the raid the Keepers were planning, and left it on the table. Then he took off, closing the door securely behind him. Outside in the market place, it was dark, only a few night-lights shone here and there, far from each other. He walked along the row of houses and up the steps of Clara's house. She answered the door soon after he had knocked. She was wearing a big, heavy robe, and had a cup in her hand.

"Hi Clara. I was hoping you would still be up," Doru said.

"I can't sleep well, these days? I suppose I rest well enough during the day," Clara said. "What brings you here at this hour? I didn't see you tonight?"

"I came in late. I bring bad news. Can I come in?" he said and looked at her.

"Well, you don't have to look so serious, son. Nothing can be that bad. Death is just another word for transformation. I thought you taught that in your school," Clara said and let him in the door.

Doru laughed at her directness.

"Clara, nothing can break you in two, I am sure. I just don't like to see you in a bad spot, that's all. But I feel reassured now that you don't see it that way. It's good. You have always been my best student," Doru said and was interrupted by Clara.

"No flatter here, keep it for the young women, whom you seem so fond of. I just tell you, don't break their hearts. I know you, your ideas are not of this world, never were. We are not all constructed that way, you know."

They sat in the living room. Clara brought out another cup for him and he told her about the planned raid that lay in store for Greenwich. Clara showed very little surprise or worry. She shrugged her shoulders and gave him a long hug.

"Don't worry about me, I know you don't like abandoning your mother again or any woman, but we are much stronger than you imagine, son," Clara said and laughed a soft, loving laughter.

He could still hear her sweet laughter, as he walked down into the Underground where a silence imbued him, so heavy and still that it made him shiver. Like that first time when he felt a deeper purpose with life as he saved a little flower from being buried in the debris, rocks and dust of his shovel. All alone in a world of destruction and decay, it had defied something so much more powerful than itself, when human beings had given up. He had learned that what the flower had done, any other being of the universe could do. It was a matter of strong focus and intention, and the world would be accessible and unlimited.

Doru walked down the steps towards the trains, but before the turnstiles he turned right, down a narrow tunnel. It connected to other train rails, but very few people used these alleys which formed an intricate network of paths in the lower parts of town. He used the faint night-lights coming from the main areas to show him the way until the light couldn't reach any further into the path, and a silent darkness enveloped him fully. A long time passed with just the sound of his feet on the ground and his breath moving through the clouded tunnel. In his dreams he never walked in tunnels, though he had spent most of his life doing that, struggling with his fears and doubts. In his dreams he walked in deep, dense woods, along narrow paths fully embraced by one trunk after another, thick and slim; anything that could grow grew here. The power of magical and fertile growth left no space for air, light or renewal. No room for emptiness. The forest exhausted itself by its own floridness, suffocated itself by its strong intention to grow. Sera had been in the forest too in her dreams, and when making love to him. The forest of dark and light. The world of the forest demanded courage to see, to explore and to find truths that were not easily found or heard.

He came out of the dark tunnel and entered another open market area, stripped bare in the dense, silent midnight air. The long past war still had a strong presence everywhere, and every night its terror was remembered by the few who defied the blackout and wandered the city. It was a strange kind of

commemoration of a time past in a city that was said to have always been awake, never shut down. Hiding from God and nature, they lived like moles digging their tunnels away from the sun, dulling and slowly losing most of their senses, until only their smell and hearing senses were sharp. Not even the visual media could spellbind people anymore. The rapid images and bright colors no longer had any impact, only the loudspeakers and the smells of human sweat, perfumes, foods and dark soil could awaken and stir their minds. They had become dwellers of an underworld, carrying in them the very seeds of growth and fertility that marked his many dreams and visions.

He walked past one of the many phone boxes that were made out of glass and inside had comfortable, padded seats. One glass wall had been crushed. The wall of glass was still there, but it had lost its smooth, flat and visible surface, and instead a pattern of thousands of little mosaic pieces appeared. It looked as if someone had fallen into the wall and the indented print of a back and behind remained. Doru went up to touch the glass. It was almost solid in its present condition. It felt like elephant skin, dry and husky. Walking further on, he had to enter more narrow tunnels and closed markets before he came to the West Fourth Market. Finding the abandoned tunnel, it didn't take him long to reach the black door, and the chills of the darkness and desertedness were soon behind him.

o o o

One day passed before Clara told the others about the raid. Nobody was upset by the fact that she had forgotten to give them this important information sooner. Clara had her ways with people, and most often they were left unquestioned. She told them at the dinner table, all laid out with its many dishes, which Rami and Sera had carefully prepared, while he told her about the time he went into the desert of Arizona and met an ancient people called the Hopis. They had survived western civilization, still following their old traditions and living in their houses under the natural caves of the canyons. Sera listened with curiosity and awe, wondering why of all places she had come to this underworld of walls, dark earth, and tunnels, when she could have chosen so many other places. She had landed on an island of enclosed spaces, blind paths leading nowhere, turning round in endless circles, because there was no way out. The roads on land had been closed, and the city was entered only by aircraft that connected to airtight platforms and other landing-places, which didn't put people in any contact with the outside environment.

"Friends," Clara uttered mid-way into dinner, when Millie was telling one of her stories, from when she lived with the mole people. She had fallen in love with the smell of a man, who used to visit her when everybody was asleep.

As Clara proclaimed her 'friends', Alfred almost choked on a piece of potato and Clara's bright face was suddenly losing its usual joyful expression.

"One of my friends has informed me that the Keepers are doing an inspection of the Greenwich

Market area. They are visiting us soon. I am not sure what exactly they are looking for."

"What does that mean?" Millie asked; her mild face full of grimaces.

"I am not sure, honey, but you might not be safe here for a while unless you, we are ready to face the Ustodians, and tell them our opinion about certain things. We have put up with this world for many years now," Clara said and looked at the crowd around the table.

Everyone had stopped eating and was paying attention to the seriousness of their voices and thoughts.

"I, we, haven't done anything wrong, why is it that I still feel I should hide? I don't like the way things are run in this city anymore - you can't move freely - but I don't want to run any risk. There are too many rules and restrictions and too much at stake. I don't know where I can go. I have lived in this world for too long. It's my home," Alfred said and looked depressed.

For a second, Sera almost got up to tell them about the ground world, that it was accessible. Something held her back. *Time isn't now*, a voice entered her mind.

For a long time they were all quiet around the table, as if waiting in anticipation. Waiting for judgment day. Suddenly the conversation recontinued, and everything went back to normal. A chattering whirled around the table. Tony began to tell the story of how he found Clara when he had reached the bottom in his life, thinking of taking it all away and escaping from the known into another dark place, where he could sleep his way into oblivion. Clara had reminded him that perhaps it was not a dark space, and he would have to work even harder there than he did in the world of the living. Clara had soon convinced Tony to reevaluate his choices. He hadn't made many choices of his own in his life and deciding to live with Clara was one of the best and worst, he said with a great big laugh. Now, he had to work with himself, but it had its good points, he said wittingly.

The night passed with everybody talking about themselves as if this was their last opportunity to tell their stories. Sera was moved by being part of the group, but said very little. Somebody wanted to hear about Aotearoa, and Tony thought it strange that she had decided to go all the way across a wide ocean to live in this city. He didn't buy into the importance of the grant and the studies; it had to be something else. If not a twisted mind then a divine, he said. Unable to respond to this, Sera simply smiled and the topic was quickly changed.

The following morning without having spoken about it, they all started packing, except from Clara and Sera.

"Rami, are you leaving too?" Sera said with a sigh, when she found him sitting on his bed, putting his few belongings into his backpack.

"I think it is time to move on. I did well, sold all the stuff I had brought. Now, it is time to go pay other friends a visit."

Rami had a smile that made you sink into another more peaceful world; however, this morning Sera

only felt thrown off.

"But you only just came," Sera said, her eyes welling up.

"I will be back sooner or later."

In only two hours everybody had left the house, and Clara and Sera were sitting at the table listening to the silence. Now, Sera understood why the house was full of people normally. All this space had to be given to someone, otherwise it became the abode of invisible guests, some uninvited.

"So what now?" Sera said, feeling a little lost.

"We wait. Are you sure you want to stay here, Sera?" Clara said and looked worried.

"Where else can I go?"

"Didn't you say you had a friend? You could go and stay with him, until things become better between you and your roommate," Clara suggested.

"I can't go there right now. What about you, Clara? What's going to happen with you? What about the Keepers, what have you done to them? And do you know what they are coming here for?"

Clara shrugged her shoulders.

"I know as little as you, my child. I have to have faith that things make a good turn. I learned a long time ago that fear won't bring me anywhere I want to go, so I must be present. I don't know whether you understand, Sera. But if you don't leave, you go hide in the attic, when they come. I wouldn't tempt life too much after what you have been through already. Save your energy for the day when it is really needed. There isn't much we can do about this one," Clara said and gave Sera a hug.

Sera could feel the woman's warm, bountiful body against her. It wasn't like her mother's skinny, vulnerable body that offered no protection, only little kisses on her cheeks. Clara was an abounding woman, however, in her beautiful dresses and colors, there was no sign of her amplexity, and she carried herself lightly; a generous, loving woman who had plenty of everything. The best thing about her was her vanilla-scented skin, which always softened anyone who came near enough.

They spent the waiting cleaning the house from one end to another, even the stairs and the shelves that could only be reached with a ladder. At the end of the day, there was no trace of the group of people that had lived there. An extensive house inhabited by two women.

They came early the following morning. Sera had slept very badly, waking every other hour. She had slept in Clara's room, so that she could run if she needed to. They were both wide awake when the first knock sounded through the house. Neither of them said anything. Clara opened the small trap door in the ceiling, and Sera crawled up the tiny steps and went to the back of the dark, musty smelling attic, where four feet high ceilings forced her to crawl. With her face on the dusty floors, her heart was pounding away. She heard Clara close the trap door as quietly as possible. The smell reminded her of the tracks and Ea's attic. She bit her lip hard, not to feel the pain of fear entering her body. The taste of metal stayed for a

long time in her mouth, as she nervously licked her lips. Tears ran down her cheeks spontaneously. She crawled further and further to the back end and stopped when she couldn't get any further. She couldn't see the floor or her hands. The dark had swallowed her up. She was no longer anybody. Something greater and mightier than her filled the space. She pulled her legs up to her chest and listened to her breathing. All that was left was her breath and heart pounding.

From downstairs she could hear voices. One voice was shouting something and she sensed Clara's presence, her voice was low, but distinct. What were they after anyway? They went through the whole house, searching, rummaging and messing up its cleanliness. Listening in on the voices in the house, Sera forgot the darkness and loneliness. She focused with all of her will and heard the voices more clearly.

"Lady, once again, we have been informed that certain information is to be found in your house. We intend to find it with or without your cooperation," a voice clamored.

"What kind of information are you talking about, Sir?" Clara asked after a while.

"Do you have an authority to search my house, Sir?" she tried again.

"I don't need any authority, Lady," the man said. "I work for the Ustodians under their strict orders. If you haven't noticed, they are the authority around here ... search and ransack every corner of the house! The woman isn't cooperating. I want to leave with something, even if it has to be the woman herself," the leader yelled.

"Sir, we have looked in all rooms."

"Is there a basement and an attic?"

"Go look around."

Sera couldn't make out how many Keepers were there, but she knew that sooner or later they would find the trap door in the ceiling. She suddenly realized that tears were still running down her cheeks. She was holding onto her knees and rocking slightly back and forth, which released some of the tension in her body. She thought of the fields of Waikato and Lake Taupo. The hills and valleys, which would twist and snarl in the landscape like roller coasters, were the greenest color she had ever seen. She imagined it was the greenest color, since she hadn't traveled much elsewhere. She was running her hands through the grass, when she heard someone push against the trap door. She couldn't see, only hear. She had been sitting in the same position since she had crawled her way to the back. Now, she realized that she had to find something to hide behind. Her hands groped for feeling something in the dark. It didn't take long before she felt the square side of a box, and slowly she pulled it closer to her. The Keeper opened the trap door and the sound of the box scraping the floor was drowned. He had a torch, and she saw how it wandered on the walls.

She curled up like a little ball and held her breath for a long time, closing her eyes, in order not to see or feel what was going on. She wanted to shut out the world, so that it couldn't reach her with its scary faces and demands. A long time passed with her eyes closed. This time she couldn't hear anything. She was

wondering if she had closed down her hearing too and really had vanished into another world, away from the mirages of this one. Then she heard a voice.

"There is nothing up here, Sir," the Keepers said. "It's empty."

After that a long silence infused the house, and Sera was too exhausted to open her eyes. She went into a world of no senses. A vast emptiness prevailed here.

o o o o

The darkness of the tunnels stretched far into my spirit like a melancholic melody. Images of my life were waving around my head like bees around their hive. I thought I would hold on to them. Their familiarity comforted me in this lonely, lightless element, brought a presence to the grand feelings of absence and deprivation.

There was a light ahead of me, flickering like light in the darkness does. It seemed that by directing my gaze toward the light, I could see the future, look into something which wasn't yet, but always had been. I moved a little further toward the light and a little further away from the darkness, and as my spirit wavered in between the two, the light and the dark, I entered an ecstatic sense of being, opening and letting in. Purely, lovingly. It was simple there, reachable, transforming.

o o o

<sera, sera dear > a voice said to her.

At first, she thought Clara was there to take care of her. She felt like she had been beaten and bruised. She opened her eyes, and saw the darkness again. Nothing had changed. Everything was empty and dark. Someone had spoken to her, and now the voice was gone. She listened again for voices, but heard nothing. Then she started crawling by pure instinct. She had no idea of how long she had been away. It could be evening now, or a hundred years could have passed. She had been in another world. She reminisced a state of being, but it wasn't a focused thought, and it slipped from her like water in her hands. Nothing was normal anymore, she realized. She had very little to hold on to. She wanted to cry out for someone's help, but her voice was gone. She moved slowly down the floor. Had they taken Clara with them? Why had she not stayed with Clara?

She tried to keep a straight line, trying to remember where the trap door was. It took her a couple of detours before she found it. The darkness pulled in every cell of her, confusing and muddling her mind. With her fingers, she felt around the edge of the latch. Patiently her fingers felt for a crack big enough for one of them to hold on to, and slowly she pulled the latch up. Holding it slightly open with one hand, she looked and listened. Downstairs it was dark and quiet. She bit her lip again, in order not to cry. The metal taste came back. The pain from the biting distracted her mind. She listened for a long time, staring into

the dark, before she opened the trap door all the way up. The ladder had been put aside and there was no way for her to reach it, so she jumped the best she could, from what she had learned from climbing as a child. She landed on her feet, but the thrust made her fall to her side, hurting the left ankle again. The pain made her think of George and the tunnels, and curiously, she felt a little better.

She moved calmly through the rooms of the house. It felt like walking in a war zone, everything had been separated from its original order. They hadn't only searched for information, they had taken the liberty to bring everything out of its equilibrium. Sera began bringing the pieces together, one room after another. They had found her things, and they hadn't been spared. She felt violated, angry about the state of the city, but like Alfred she still had no idea of what she could do, not yet. Doru had spoken about the illusion of reality, and how it was possible to change things. People had not come to this world without gifts and abilities. Human beings were very capable, and there were ways to overcome their limitations and find the freedom to be transformed and to transform the world. She thought about this, if it was true what held people back? Why had more people not joined this different order, why did they put up with the present state of affairs?

There was no trace of Clara. She checked the computer, and no messages were waiting for her to reassure her that Clara was okay. Clara had let them into her sacred space, and now they had taken her. Stealing her freedom was only one of many things, they might be doing to her, Sera feared. Sera tried for several minutes to tune into her, but with no success.

At 3:00 hours, Sera had brought back the house to looking normal again. She had packed all of her belongings in her backpack. It was waiting for her in her bedroom when she fell exhausted onto her bed and fell into an unruly sleep, in which she heard Clara's laughter echoing through her body.

She woke early to the pounding of her own heart. She was still running away from the Keepers as she sat up in the bed. Kali was sitting on the edge of the bed, right between her feet, majestically, licking her paws and smiling like only she did. The white spot around her mouth turned into a bright fire in the midst of all the dark fur.

"Where have you been, Kali? What are we going to do with you?" Sera said and Kali got up, leaving her warm spot, and walked over to Sera, while babbling in her special tongue. Sera padded her head and her slim back.

"I've been so scared," Sera said to Kali.

Sera's heart gave in to release, and mellowed down. Kali walked in two circles around her hand, before she jumped off the bed and vanished.

"Kali!" Sera yelled and got out of bed in haste.

"Kali," she said, running through all the rooms of the house, upstairs and downstairs.

There was no trace of Kali. And the barren emptiness of the house hit her like a stone. Sera had meant to take care of the cat, guarding it until Clara came back, but she couldn't stay in the house by

herself. The memory of what had happened would break the silence with the sounds of those who were and yet weren't. The quiet house was full of voices, if she listened, and they weren't always familiar ones. The thought of the Keepers coming back for her too couldn't escape her. She would hide in her Grandma Ea's attic, anytime; now, the coffin box and all the other strange articles inhabiting the space would be a blessing to her, while crammed up against the wall, waiting for the men to leave.

Sera soon gave up the search. Like all other stray cats, Kali was her own. There was not much she could do about it. She put out all of the dry cat food, so that Kali wouldn't starve and placed it on the kitchen floor. With her heart rising and falling like waves inside of her, and occasional tears purging her face, she took her bag and left Clara's house. She only looked back once, just before entering the steps leading to the Underground. The air was peaceful in the big market place and she heard no voices, neither from the house nor from the great gathering that had taken place only a couple of days before.

Stepping into the warm, enclosing tunnels came as a relief to Sera, which surprised her at first. It was the familiarity that made her feel safe, she realized, not the actual comfort of the place. She took a train at random and put her big bag next to her, while absorbing the noises and sounds of the train moving, the loudspeakers, and the few people conversing. She heard nothing else but the world's commotion, and it felt like bliss. It made her forget about the tears pressing to come out like an uncontrollable force, about what they were doing to Clara, and where she would go now. She sat there for a long time gliding through the city of tunnels and blackout curtains. The city was a commendation of the obscurity and concealment of the world. She had to look very close to find the palpable behind the shadows. It all drifted by her like in dreams. Even the faces in the car seemed to melt into one great mass that had no beginning or end, just one endless body drawing her to and fro, up and down, lolling her to sleep in a comfortable, benighted way.

It wasn't until early afternoon, when there were fewer passengers, and she felt that someone was watching her from some hidden camera somewhere, that she got up and left the train. She wandered around Lexington Station for a while and sat down on one of the platform benches, as if waiting for another train to arrive, but when one did glide into the station, she remained in her seat. Not more than ten minutes had passed before she got up again, this time her feet moved swiftly. Two keepers were coming from one end of the platform, and Sera walked past them, her head raised as high as she could with the heavy load on her shoulders, steering toward the end they had come from. They looked at her and yet she felt there was no real contact. She sensed that they saw her bag, the sweat on her forehead. They studied her without speaking, and without any notice they stopped, but she didn't.

"Hey young lady! What's the rush!" one of the two said, making her slow down to a halt.

"I have a train to catch," Sera mumbled and suddenly knew where she was going, but lingered in front of the two Keepers.

"It looks heavy. You know the trains won't go anywhere," the other said and grinned.

He had dimples, which were the only feature about his hairless face and head that appealed to her. She focused on the dimples and felt herself breathing again.

"Looks like you've had a bad day, would you like us to escort you to your destination," the other said and grinned too.

He had no dimples, but he had some hair left on his scalp. His eyes were dark blue, the kind that only came in eye contacts, piercing through whatever entered their gaze.

Sera froze for a while, not sure what to do next, hoping they would simply disappear. All she knew was that she didn't trust them, but there were no words to make them go away, she feared.

"Well, I think you need some help, young lady. Have you just come to the city? Well, you have come to the right people. We can help you. Where are you going?" said the bald man, still grinning, and now reaching out toward her backpack, gesturing to take it for her.

It was the hand coming toward her that brought her back. She finally generated a smile to the two Keepers and shook her head lightly, trying not to exaggerate any of her movements.

"So very kind of you, eh," she uttered in the heaviest home dialect she could produce. "I will do just faine. I know my way e'round."

Sera gazed at the two men, muttered a 'good day', smiled again and turned on her heels. This time she didn't look back, just walked taking one step at a time, making sure her feet didn't go too fast or change into a run. And for the rest of her trip, changing trains once, walking up and down stairs, through corridors and tunnels, and down more platforms until she reached the West Fourth Market, she didn't look up or gaze at anybody, she kept her focus on her walking, steering toward her destination. It seemed the only safe thing to do. There were no second chances without things turning ugly. Not today. She had seen and heard too much already. How could things not turn ugly at some point, if she completely ignored the rules of the game, the flow and order of this world?

She found the path system easily and made sure nobody noticed her get off the beaten track. She sniffed in the air like a sweet flower. There was a place on Mount Manganui, an old volcano, which in the summer was overrun by small purple harebells, yellow rush lilies, and weeds. As a child she had been here once with her mother. It was just after her father's accident, and out of forgetfulness, Mia would let Sera run around on her own. It meant that she was free to explore for a while without the disgrace of grown-ups. They had gone to the small mountain, which in reality wasn't more than a hill, an excellent observation post here on the flat land of the coastline. Sera had run ahead, quickly forgetting the way back to the picnic basket Mia carried, and had become lost in the purple and yellow sloping field of Mount Manganui, which spoke to her, called her to its blankets. She thought she could smell the colors, feel how they altered the width of her nostrils, and danced into her stomach as softly as butterflies. If she closed her eyes and let the air into her lungs, the colors stayed with her behind her eyelids, and so she was lost in a drowsiness of the colors of the flowers and the grass, oblivious to the calls of her anxious mother.

George stood at the door as if he had been waiting for her.

“Hi,” she said and didn’t know where to look. He took her hands and squeezed them a little.

“I’m glad you found us again. What brings you here?”

She closed her eyes and saw the colors again: purple, yellow and green.

“I have nowhere to go.”

“You’re always welcome here. You can stay for as long as you need.”

“Really?”

She looked at his eyes trying to focus on their shades, but couldn’t.

“Yes, the only thing is that we want you to help out at the center in whatever way you can,” he said and opened the door, letting go of her hands.

“Thank you so much,” she half whispered, her voice cracking up. And before she knew of it, she couldn’t control herself any longer. George was there though, like a firm monument, not letting her out of sight, until she calmed down again.

XIV

She resisted opening her eyes for as long as possible. Was it still her dream or was someone touching her gently? Just above her floated the picture of Kali, the great goddess of transformation and time. Her four arms reached to all the corners of the earth and her hips were arched, shaping the curves of the world. In one of her hands she carried a severed head. In another she held her lethal sword. Her third hand formed the gesture to annihilate all fear, and in her fourth she carried the bowl containing the gift of immortality for all who dared to be transformed by her sword. Around her neck she wore a necklace of the skulls of the people she had decapitated. Her long, black hair almost touched the ground, and she wore a big skirt of long thick threads, and around her arms, ankles and waist hung heavy jewelry.

“Sera,” she heard a voice utter and for a moment, she thought Kali was talking to her from above.

Then she realized where she was and that the soft voice was familiar. It was Hans. She looked up. His eyes still had that stern solidity, from when they had first been introduced to one another by George. Hans was a small boy, almost ten years old. His golden yellow hair which stood up like a ruffled haystack, was the first thing that had caught her eye. Golden as the rays of the sun. It had warmed her instantly, making her feel bonded to the boy in front of her, though she had never spent much time with children. She had no siblings. As a only child, she had wandered in a world filled with adults. His silent, attentive eyes expressed curiosity and reminded her of the ocean.

“I think you’ll enjoy each other’s company,” George had said smiling.

“Our two new residents,” he had added lovingly, and put his hands on their shoulders.

George had a way of assuming things; had it been anyone else, it would have annoyed her to the point that she’d be defiant of whatever comment or statement had been made.

“Sera, class starts now!”

She sat up on the small mattress she had been given. Hans had moved his mattress next to hers from the other corner, so that his head pointed toward her feet. In the daytime, both mattresses were pushed up against the back wall of the common room, and the floor space was used for day activities.

“Now Sera! I’m not going to wait for you!” Hans said impatiently, but still he waited loyally for her.

Now she remembered. George had invited them to join a class which was normally closed to newcomers, but he had made an exception. The two of them were already asking him questions that exceeded the first year of studies at the center.

“I had some strange dreams ...” she said, still a little muddled, between worlds.

“Later Sera.”

The students were already seated on small pillows on the floor, and George pointed to a corner of the room for them to sit. George started the class by guiding them through a meditation, unfamiliar to Hans and Sera. He first let them focus on their breath, moving quickly into a visualization of the Visuddha yantra, a white lotus flower with sixteen petals. The yantra was to be placed with the eye of the mind in front of their throat and stay there for as long as possible, while breathing through it. The ones who had been initiated repeated their silent mantra within their mind while keeping the visualization.

Sera found that she had plenty of her own mantras to guide her and moved easily into the meditation. She quickly lost any attachment to her mind and its flustering thoughts. The white figure stood vividly and waved over her throat. For a while there was only whiteness, then the petals appeared clearly, and in the middle of them a blue area, and inside that a white circle with a blurred image of an animal. Whenever her mind would try to create its own images and thoughts, she would guide it calmly back to the figure. It was like uncovering layer after layer, and she knew there was more to see, further to go, but for the time being, the animal was the farthest she could go. When she came to, Hans was looking at her again with a mixture of amusement and concern.

“Did you fall asleep again?” Hans whispered.

She shook her head and looked away; sometimes Hans could be a little too silly for her. The effect of the meditation still vibrated pleasantly in her body. She just wanted to stay there.

Two weeks at the school, and the whole world had turned into a wondrous place, even 15 feet below the ground. Her past experiences were like the stars of the night, invisible to this land. She never wanted to be anywhere else. This was home, and it made her feel a peace within that she would never have imagined possible. She didn’t miss anybody or any places; the sky, ocean, trees, and love were all here in the palm of her hands and behind her eyelids. Where could there be a better, more convenient place? She didn’t have to go searching anywhere, it was already here.

Only a couple of times had she ventured to step into the other world to buy food for the center. With her ID-card she was one of the privileged ones. It had been like entering another planet. Her greatest fear was that upon returning from her shopping, the center would mysteriously have perished. And she would find it had all been another dream. She had avoided going back to university and hadn't spoken to any of her friends there. But some time, she would have to face it again? With or without dread in her heart.

George had said that every man and woman had the Divine in them to transform. The world as it

was experienced through the eyes of the beholder was merely a mirror of his or her karma, the causes and effects of his or her actions and previous paths throughout time. However, everyone held the power to change his or her karma. As nothing was permanent, like one living breath inhaling or exhaling, contracting or expanding, there would always be movement and fluctuation whether you worked on it or not.

Change, she thought; people breaking up, houses falling apart, bodies growing and decaying, eventually to wither away, hurricanes and floods destroying. All negative things? And death the ultimate change of them all. But was death really the ultimate change? Wasn't it just moving from one dimension to another? And yet movement was change. When she was only five, her father had been taken away from her; a change she hadn't welcomed. For that reason alone, death to her was pitiless and stern; death was inevitable, no questions asked because there were no answers.

Later on in her life, when she started in college in Wellington, far away from home, it had been like death again. Starting all over again. Beginning something new, changing her perspective, her friends. Change. The realization she eventually made about life was that it existed because of change, and it had its pleasant and unpleasant sides. At that point, life had still been painful and troublesome. It had its small glimpses of joy, but generally she couldn't have everything at once. It was as though she couldn't go that far. She wasn't allowed to. She had to do the right things, though they made her feel hollow within. A strange pain in her chest. Was it karma or just heritage? She was slowly opening that door now, to find that balance between joy and pain, light and dark. Change was also the shift from pain to joy, learning to see the world as a safe and loving place. And when that door was all open, would she break free like George said, would she grasp life? And realize the dream they were all part of?

As a girl she used to think that someone had taken her father away from her because she didn't deserve him, even long after Mia had told her that he had lost control of the car in a storm in the rocky landscape of West Auckland, where he worked as a ranger. And so she had been afraid of loving him, she had been afraid of the sadness that came from longing too much to change the course of things. She had searched for his voice among the voices that came to her now. Why had he never contacted her, now that she could hear them? She wanted to hear his voice. She had missed him all those years spent alone with her mother, who had lost the only man right for her. Sera imagined she could remember what his voice sounded like. A both soft and stern voice. She wanted to be able to love him again. To remember the way he truly was, and not the tubes and instruments that had kept his body alive. If what they said was true, he could already have come back to the physical world. Maybe that was why she couldn't hear his voice?

"The scriptures teach us that by working with the subtle, telluric energies of the Universe, in other words, the macrocosmic forces like the sun, moon, or earth, we can enter a gateway to a higher consciousness," George said and stared into the air, while he paused for a moment.

“Asanas and meditation can help us, also if we work with our karma and yamas. We have to bear in mind that we, our body, mind and soul, are a microcosm of the Universe. Within we hold the Divine forces. We are a manifestation of light and darkness, but we can go beyond those opposites that constantly have to be kept in balance on this level of living.

“With the visualization we just did, we’ve taken a huge step in our spiritual development, though some of you might not have felt much difference from the Laya yoga we’ve done so far. This is a step toward yantra meditation, which means we move away from closing our eyes and excluding the world to focus on an object, toward achieving an omnipotent presence in the world, Samadhi, the eighth stage on the nine-fold path. This is the highest level of concentration, after that liberation comes. No special initiation is required to attain this stage, you just practice your concentration and meditation, and eventually it will come. Practice and awareness are the two major things to observe. Without them we cannot attain enlightenment,” he said, as he got up from his seat and handed out the sheets of theory for the class.

“I suggest you read the story about Buddha again, to gain some resonance. I always like to read the story of his spiritual journeys. And before we begin the Hatha yoga, I’d like to introduce to you two newcomers, who are showing great intuition and courage, Hans and Sera,” George said and pointed to the back of the room, and everybody turned and smiled to them.

After the class, midst the turmoil of people getting dressed and leaving, George called out for Sera.

“I’d like to talk to you,” he said and caught her glance.

She looked at Hans briefly to win his permission. They spent most of their time together. She had never been with anyone for so many hours. She enjoyed it, because Hans accepted her ways completely. There were no struggles, no explanations needed.

Hans smiled and bowed lightly with his hand on his heart to the room, before he left. They all did that gesture as to show respect to the sacred room’s energy. She walked up toward the small altar, where George was seated in a lotus position. He sat like a flower floating on water, only waving slightly when a strong gust blew at its petals.

“What do you know about our MOSA group?”

“Nothing, really,” she answered and sat down in front of him.

She could sit cross-legged for much longer now without tiring out. George looked at her for a long time, before he spoke again.

“The MOSA group is closely connected to the center. Not everybody, though, in it are yogis, but we are all working toward improving the world through using non-aggressive methods and karmic work. We need your help, your gifts.”

“But what can I do?” Sera asked, scared.

She knew Hans would have said 'yes' without batting an eyelid, but she couldn't possibly have much to offer. George didn't answer, his face was quiet. She couldn't tell if it expressed disappointment or anger. She didn't want to show him her fears, only her very best.

"We all do what is within our capacity. We are not revolutionaries in a traditional sense. We are silent warriors; nevertheless we practice power that is will power and energy. Only our goal is different from that of most powerful people in our society. Have you ever heard about Mahatma Gandhi, a great soul, who took residence in India hundred years ago? He was a spiritual and political leader there during some terrible years of national discord between Muslims and Hindus. His methods were those of non-violence. And he succeeded well. Ever since, that kind of method has been used politically by radical groups of people. Gandhi strove to rid the world of colonialism, racism and violence. He sought the good in man by being an example. Among other things, he demonstrated his will power by fasting. Instead of using other means of violence like his opponents, he showed compassion, dedication, discipline and beliefs through his own body. He knew that change is about self-realization. When we truly know ourselves, we can truly change the world, we partake in.

"As you've discovered, Sera, the Grounds have been accessible for some time now. People have been deprived of those fruits and opportunities for a long time. They are living in silent oppression. Only God knows what else the Ustodians are plotting. There has been so much darkness and too little light for too long. You've had a taste of it, Sera. You know more than most of us."

George looked at Sera and smiled.

"And you know how to listen," he paused. "Take some time to think about it. Listen to your heart. Through the heart, we learn to go beyond the powers of the opposite forces that govern this world."

Hans was sitting on his mattress when she came back. They were both silent for a long time. *'Listen to your heart', he always says. But how?* she wished to ask him, but knew there was no rationale. Either she did or she didn't. She lay down on her mattress, her head facing Hans. She thought about her heart, what it might tell her, and how she could help.

"Sera?" Hans asked.

"Ohm," she answered, still wrapped in her own thoughts.

"Everybody thinks I ran away from school"

"Didn't you?" she asked absentmindedly.

"I've never been above the Underground."

"What are you saying?" Sera asked, sobering from her thoughts, and staring at her friend.

"They say I was born down there. I have a few memories, from when I was a baby. I saw light, I don't remember wherefrom though...."

"Hans, who are they?"

“The mole people, that’s what they call us.”

When he noticed the look of surprise on Sera’s face, Hans became reluctant.

“You can’t tell anyone I ran away. I wanted to see the light again and the trains, which always rumbled above us. I just had to get out, I didn’t know why then. I just knew I wanted out.”

“You’re serious,” Sera said, absorbing the news.

“Don’t tell anyone, I don’t want to go back. I like it here,” Hans pleaded.

“Nobody’s going to send you back, if you don’t want to. George would never do that.”

“Maybe not,” he mumbled quietly.

“Then you must know Charlie and Benji?” Sera asked.

Hans looked puzzled.

“I met them in prison,” she added.

“Well, I know about them. They live by themselves in another camp, they keep to themselves.”

“Would you know how to find them?”

Hans nodded.

“Why would you go down there? They have a monster. They say its eyes glow in the dark.”

“They’re such kind people, you know.”

Sera looked at him; he looked like the first day she met him, his green-blue eyes dull and sunken in contemplation, his thin, bony hands and arms hung like the flabby leaves of a plant in need of water. She had wondered about him. He didn’t speak much. It was as though he hid something, but she couldn’t hear his voice, as if it had sunk to another level altogether. Now she knew what more than food he had been deprived of. She tried to grasp the reality of the world he, Charlie and Benji came from. She wanted to see it, feel it for herself, but it filled her with an immense fear. It would be like falling into the depths of the worst nightmare.

“Are you okay?” she asked him out of sympathy.

He nodded.

She wanted to hold him, but only took his hand. How was it to have a home like that? And as a kid? How did he find his way in the dark Underground? Not even the open sky at night was pitch black. She remembered her day in Clara’s attic. She got out again. The nightmare stopped. Living in a lightless place was unimaginable, and yet how could dark exist without light? Hans had seen or felt it, was that how the dark could exist? Within a light of some sort?

“You miss your family?”

“Sometimes,” his gaze was turned downwards. “But this is my home now.”

Sera nodded.

“Who says we can’t have it all, anyway,” she exclaimed.

“You know, I will only want you to show me the entrance to the place if you won’t go there again.”

Hans looked solemn.

“But how can they help us?” Hans asked.

“Maybe they can make the Ustodians change their mind about some things? Or maybe they can teach the citizens of this city something new?”

The small kitchen had become a tribal dwelling, where people met to talk, cook and sing around the fire, only their fire was a stove. They made grains and vegetable stews from what had grown in and come out of the soil. The kitchen smelled of onion and curry. Sera helped out with the cooking, guided by Will with the blond hair and the soft, bluish eyes, whom Sera had met the first day she had come to the center. He was a singer, and his melodic, mild tenor voice sounded above the little noises of people walking, cutting, and sitting. He had gone up to her every time she was on her own. He had asked her if he could kiss her. When she answered 'no', he had laughed, and said that he didn't mean to sound pushy, but there was something so sweet about her that he wanted to eat her. He still held her hand and gave her hugs often, which she secretly enjoyed.

Soledad stopped by for dinner that same evening.

“Hi, Sera,” Soledad said, as she entered the kitchen, walking straight toward her. “So how do you like it here?”

Sera nodded with a smile, and continued cutting the last carrot in the pile.

Soledad was wearing a long, pale blue dress that showed all of her curves and softness. Her shiny, thick hair fell like waves of tenderness, and Sera felt like running her fingers through it. Sera caught herself hiding her eyes from Soledad's intense gaze.

“I hear stories about you, good ones,” Soledad said teasingly.

“Good,” Sera said and smiled again.

She was getting used to the way people at the center caressed each other with words.

George showed up last, just as they all sat down to consecrate the meal, giving their thanks in silence. Soon all of them were enveloped in contemplation. Rather than saying a prayer in her mind, Sera tried to feel gratefulness. Tonight twelve members of the family were gathered as best they could around the small table in the kitchen. On a regular night, it would only have been Sera, Hans, Michael, and George and perhaps one guest. Most students at the center took classes in the evening and rarely stayed for long. After dinner, everybody went upstairs to the common room.

When Soledad entered the common room, Hans and Sera were getting ready to start a game of backgammon, their pastime ritual if they weren't reading or doing yoga. Since Hans was only starting to learn to read and write, he had a lot of questions and difficulties. Little by little Sera had taken over the job of teaching him, since he always came to her for help. That was how they had ended up spending most of

their time together, and Sera's psychology studies had been pushed further and further away.

Doru was the only one who would separate them, when he came to see Sera. It had only been a few visits, but those were special times. There was so much to explore and yet, so little time and space in store for them. He rarely spoke much, unless she asked him questions, and then it was mostly about the practice he spoke. Even so she felt fulfilled in his presence. She felt a kind of love that flowed between them, which she had never experienced before. It was deep as the ocean, and stable and solid as a growing tree. She felt herself changing and opening up in the process. She was exploring how she could enter those mysterious places inside of herself that she had never dared look at before. When they were together, Sera and Doru, lover to lover, and student to teacher, there was no other presence. It was like an endless meditation. She wandered into the fields of their bodies and souls without ever knowing what went on behind those attentive, silent eyes, or which things he preferred from others; if he liked the ocean better than the mountains, or who had been in his life before he met her. She knew there were things he might never share with her which he couldn't share with her, and yet she knew that he could never hurt her, not the core of her. It was the deeper parts of her that he inspired her to explore and know, which made it her journey.

"So what are you up to?" Soledad asked Sera, as she went over to the table Hans and Sera were seated at.

Sera pulled out a chair for Soledad, and listened to Soledad's voice, when something melted inside of herself. Soledad's gaze became a loving energy that enveloped her. Sera had never listened to a woman's voice like that before. Women's voices had always either corrected or taken care of her; they had never spoken directly to her, or wanted her presence. For a long time Sera didn't know what to say. The two women just gazed at each other, smiling in wonder.

"I've been studying a lot," Sera finally answered.

"Psychology?"

"Not really. Yoga."

"It really interests you?"

Sera nodded and looked at the game again. Talking reminded her of too many things left undone. She rolled the dice and moved a few pieces. Hans was in the lead, as usual.

"You're a teacher like Doru, right?" Sera asked when she had moved her pieces.

"Mhm," Soledad answered. "I don't teach here though."

"Why not?"

"George doesn't think it's wise ...," Soledad stopped talking, aware that she might get into trouble.

"I know, you get assignments for the MOSA group," Sera whispered to Soledad, and saw her surprise.

Sera was pleased to see Soledad's reaction. Usually, she always showed such confidence, now at least

there was something she didn't know.

"George told me," Sera added and smiled.

"You never know what lies beyond the rainbow," Soledad replied, and Sera looked up from the game again.

Sera didn't know what to make of the comment, so she went back to focusing on the dice and the board. Most of Hans' pieces were home.

"You're winning again!" Sera exclaimed to Hans. "You're not cheating are you?"

Hans chuckled and moved his pieces, triumphantly.

"So what's your assignment?" Sera asked.

She was curious to know what George would want her to do.

"I work for the Ustodians, at their headquarters."

A lump in Sera's throat made it hard for her to swallow. Soledad smiled a little, not realizing that Sera wasn't surprised, but scared.

"I'm just xeroxing their documents, wasting a lot of paper for them. Quite easy work. Somebody got interested in my gemstone today," Soledad said and pulled out a leather strap from around her neck, to which a deep blue unpolished rock was attached.

"I thought I had hid it well away, but it's my luck that nobody suspected anything. I had to tell her about the times when people used gemstones to heal. Of course, we still use them here at the center. It's lapis lazula. Here, take a look," she said and handed her the necklace.

Hans was more interested in the stone than Sera, and he rolled it around in his hand, feeling its texture. When Sera was a kid, a lady had lived down her road. Sera used to visit her from time to time. She had a big fish tank full of blue, purple, pink, transparent, spotted and striped gemstones that tickled when she touched them. The lady had lived in a big red brick house full of 'dust collectors', as Mia used to call little knickknacks. Every wall in her house was painted lavender or yellow, and it felt like stepping into a field of flowers. The lady would light candles and incense in the whole house, and it would literally smell of flowers. She also had two gray-haired cats, Missie and Maura. They climbed everything that invited them to do so. They walked along narrow shelves, on windowpanes, and on tables full of old pictures, china and small sculptures without ever breaking anything. As a kid, when her mother went to the shop on the hill, Sera had visited the lady, and she was allowed to stick her hand into that pool of smooth stones. The lady had told her the names of the stones: rose quartz, amethyst, silver quartz, geodes, crystals, agates, malakits, moonstones, jades, tiger's eye, and lapis lazulis. One day, she had given her one the shape of a heart, telling her that if she carried it in her pocket at all times, she wouldn't have anything to fear. That same week, the lady moved away, leaving the house deserted in darkness, no more candles or cats sitting in the windows. The stone followed Sera for many years, hidden in her pocket. Now she wondered where she had put it.

"Maybe they'll be interested in other things too," Soledad spoke softly. "I brought some light," she added and pulled out a long white candle, which she put on the table in a small metal holder.

The game was over. They put the box with the pieces and dice away. Hans had run away with another triumph. He walked over to another table, leaving the two women on their own. There was a moment of silence between them, before Soledad spoke softly, only audible to Sera.

"You're very beautiful, Sera."

Sera thought of the ocean; green warm waves luring her, sweeping her in soft motions, grasping hold of her like tentacles. *Maybe it'll be nice, her touch*, Sera thought.

"The first time I saw you, I wanted to hold you. Can I give you a hug, my love?" Soledad spoke very softly, as a whisper. Then she stood up. Sera followed shortly after, and the women embraced.

"You smell nice," Soledad whispered into her ear.

The sound tickled in her ear, and confusion and warmth overwhelmed Sera. For a moment, their arms gathered their bodies like the roots of a tree entangled in themselves and other roots. They swayed a little, a closed circle; it was so easy to imagine the wind rustling in the leaves there, with the pulsating sound of their hearts.

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"The best part of school was to learn to read. The magical and supernatural in fairy tales and mythic stories quickly enticed me. I was hooked. I think my initial interest in yoga was rooted in the belief that human beings have the ability to access supernatural and higher powers."

Soledad and Sera were the only ones left in the common room, except from Hans, who was soundly asleep on his mattress. The candle was still burning, the only light in the room. Soledad looked into its blue core and thought of the long, white corridors of the Ustodians' headquarters; the small windowless office rooms, filled with piles of paper, files and folders, which she had no authorization to read. In the noisy, dusty copy room, which everybody rushed through as if it were a central train station, her daily meditations and consecrations unfolded like invisible flowers in a field, growing and spreading their scents.

Soledad looked at Sera again and smiled. Sera had taken her hand, and she felt her fragility shining through her translucent skin. She could see Sera's veins that ran through like rivers on a map. A different universe was imprinted in those limbs.

"I think I was 6 or 7, when I fell in love with fairy tales. They could transfer me to another place, outside of any known realm, and I escaped the meanness of kids. School was terrible, I guess up until I got into high school. Kids can be so horrible. I was so scared of their games. I was ugly, they told me and I believed them, even though my Mama always denied it. When I was still living in Peru, my Mama and Papa had insisted that I go to the bigger school, while they had the money, so I was on my own, away

from my friends in the village most of the week. I had to walk a long way to another valley. But I grew to like it, the solitude and the smell of dusty books at the school's library. I had never seen so many books in my life. I spent most of my afternoons there to Mama's surprise and thrill, only she didn't know that it wasn't homework that kept me occupied, but that I traveled into the worlds of fairies, wizards, dragons, angels, gods, and goddesses."

"There is one story in particular I attached myself to. You know as a kid full of longings, I dreamed of other worlds, which held more serenity and sense. Where all my questions were answered. Where there was more goodness than cruelty. This story wasn't the usual kind of fairy tale. The first time I read it was in the damp library at my school in Peru. It is about a little girl who has to sell matches on Christmas Eve because she is so poor. It's a very sad story, but it had an ending that touched me so deeply. Her grandmother has died from her, and she dreams of her. The little girl goes to a window where she can see children playing by a fireplace and there is a beautiful Christmas tree, all the beautiful loveliness of the material world. She is fascinated by this, longs to be there, feel the warmth and safety. She lights the matches that she was supposed to sell for her father in order to keep herself warm. She lights three of them, and with every flame, her grandmother appears. In the end, she is united with her grandmother; the light of the Christmas tree and the matches becomes the light of heaven. It was the longing in the little girl I related to; to find that inner freedom dormant in all of us, that connection to the Divine. Then, I didn't know what it was that touched me so. I thought the attraction was becoming part of the privileged behind the window," Soledad said and smiled.

"But what you really recognized in that tale was something different all together," Sera said. "We have to travel unawares to fall through the masks and walls that keep us away from ourselves."

"Yes, it is the inner journey that matters the most. Rediscovering who we are, in whatever shape it may take. I feel a lot of people here in the Underground lack that kind of movement and consciousness in their lives. They are stuck on a one-way track," Soledad said.

In this world there seemed to be all the movement she could desire, but the vibrations of the souls were still, as if frozen in a frame. Waiting. Neither taking nor giving, just running like scared animals, away from the reality of dark and light, cold and hot, earth and sky inside the body and outside of it. Bodies without senses, with automatic breaths that underneath it all held onto what had been forgotten. That was what she had come here to learn, and teach others. Sera reminded her that it could all be different, that she had the gift to teach.

"You are different, Sera. It is nice to talk to you. I am free to be myself, share my story, ...," Soledad said and looked for recognition in Sera's eyes.

Sera smiled, but didn't say anything.

The pale redness of Sera's hair and her fair, almost transparent skin made Soledad think of the great Shakti. She radiated pureness and her limbs were vigorous and flexible like a dancer's. Heart, body, and

dynamism. Like the flame in the candle, which they stared at when they didn't look at each other, Soledad was drawn to Sera's spiral of energy. Soledad had to let her breathing calm her down, and not be caught inside that spiral.

"Well, anyway, I forgot about the world of fairy tales for many years. You see, we came to the States, and I had plenty to occupy my mind and time. We kids tended to stick more together here, because we were stronger that way, when confronted with people who were opposed to our skin color, our tongue, and manners. It was very much a life focused on protecting yourself and on self-preservation. When I later met George, I remembered the other parts of my life. And I began picking up my reading again. This time, it was especially the stories of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses and the yogic scriptures, and as I dug deeper into the life of the great yogis, I learned that fairy tales don't describe some other world different from ours, it's a part of the Universe. The paranormal, the Divine, and miracles are things that can be true, be part of our lives, if we open up to them."

Sera nodded.

"I'm beginning to feel that myself," Sera said.

Soledad smiled.

"You really do bring life to the voices of the Universe," Soledad said.

"What do you mean?" Sera asked with a grave look on her face.

"Just a kind of feeling I have about you. As you awaken yourself, you awaken something in each of us. You have come here many times, Sera. George told me some of this, and I feel it myself. You bring with you the wisdom of an old soul," Soledad said.

"How do you know this? How does George know this?"

"Experience and intuition," Soledad said. "You have to feel it yourself, move further onto this journey of yours."

There was something in particular that drew Soledad to this woman, something that made her open up like she rarely did. If Soledad had been a painter, Sera was her inspiration and aspiration, but Soledad couldn't paint. She adored and worshipped Sera and wanted to make love to her like a man, but she was a woman. A disciple of the Great Shakti. For the first time in a long time, she felt incapable. She had never been in love with a woman. She only remembered having felt love.

There was a long pause. The flame continued eating its way through the wax silently.

"It's getting late. Are you staying?" asked Sera.

"I guess it is better that way. It's too late to catch a train."

"If you can find a spare mattress, come over to us. I lie over in the corner near Hans."

As Soledad lay down next to Sera on the blanket, which she had found in one of the classrooms, she could hear a heart beating fast. It was Sera's. They had blown out the candle. With the absence of light, the quietness of the place invaded her senses and with it came Sera's strong heartbeats.

“Are you afraid?” Soledad whispered and reached out for her body in the dark. A warm hand greeted her.

“Sometimes, it’s like a wall of voices is in front of me. It moves further and further, until I can hardly breathe. I feel so cornered. You don’t hear them, do you?” Sera’s voice was scarcely audible.

“No,” Soledad said, “but you know, my love, once you learn not to fear what you have been given, you can go beyond it and use it to help others. Everything is given to us for a reason, everything is a gift. And as long as you use your intuition about where is best for you to be, there is always peace and light to be found.”

Soledad paused and thought of how else she could comfort Sera.

“Obstacles are only here to be climbed and to grow and learn from. That is what I mean by calling them gifts. Everything is here to awaken us to our particular path. We are given this life, and we are fit to deal with whatever tests it may give us. Have faith in that, and pray for the help of the Universe.”

Soledad slowly moved up next to Sera, and as she felt there were no objections, she lay her body close to Sera’s. The closer their bodies came, the more surety Soledad felt. When their bodies touched, Soledad could feel warm bubbles of energy that went straight to her heart.

“Buenos noche,” Soledad whispered and kissed her hair, embracing Sera’s body from the side.

It felt soft to embrace her body, as familiar as she had imagined. Sera gave out a small sound like a cat purring, heart and fur pulsating. Their hands clasped, round and round, dancing to the tune of their hearts, blissful smiles, where had she felt that before? When had she touched a woman’s fine soft hands and smelled her sweet skin?

Then the silence came back like a lullaby and Soledad stayed there, close, inseparable like lover to lover. And in that silent space, she wandered into the realms beyond the body, traveled into the levels where the conscious, the subconscious, and the super-conscious merged.

We walk through the narrow, long, obscure passages, through a mural of a deep blue darkness. Darkness and soil, concrete and dampness are the final paintbrush strokes that mark this labyrinth. Once we set foot on these grounds, we knew time was something we invented out of fear and vanity. Now time has turned into a ball of fire and lights up the whole place, eating away itself and everything it touches. If there were more air in this place, the earth itself would be set on fire.

A nervous, anxious excitement governs the crowd. I see their swollen faces, aroused and red, lit up by the candles they carry in their shaky hands.

I wake up on the ground. The crowd is gone. As I get up, I notice light coming from somewhere deeper into the passages. The fire is gone. The light comes out of a window.

Then I’m back in the crowd. The tunnels are narrowing in, and we are all pushing our way forward. Just as the air seems to run out, we feel a soft, cool wind sweeping over our faces and necks. I know where the wind is

coming from, and where we are going. Then suddenly there's more space, as if the crowd is waning into the old rocks and concrete blocks of the tunnels. I'm walking on my own with a child's energy, full of light and love for the moment. There is light everywhere around me!

XV

Walking to the train was like walking in a dream. She could see everything around her, the moving feet and the heads high above them, the shop windows, the magazine stands, but only distantly from inside her glass bell. She felt tempted to turn around many times.

“Sera, you must keep walking, keep that head high,” she whispered to herself.

She kept walking the corridors of the West Fourth markets. Not far to go from the station. Soon she stood outside one of the entrances to NYU. It felt like the first time she had come to New York and stepped foot on the premises of the university. Only then the excitement of coming, the pride and ambition of having won the scholarship had for awhile spellbound her senses like a drug. Now her hands were shaking from nervousness, a different kind of excitement. She was facing a new reality or perhaps it was only her vision of the world that had changed?

She had met Selma in the hallway after her first graduate class outside.

“So what did you think?” Selma had said, as she stopped in front of Sera.

“Kind of basic, but a nice teacher,” Sera answered, as she gazed at the tall, blond woman with the painted lips and eyelashes, feeling a little intimidated by her sharp, well protected eyes.

“What’s your name?”

“Sera Skau,” she answered.

“So I got the right person! I’m your mentor, I’m here to help you settle in and all of that, you know,” Selma said with excitement and put emphasis on ‘all of that’, promising kinship and genuine support.

“Oh, the meeting! I didn’t make it!” Sera exclaimed.

“That’s all right, I was late anyway.”

Sera ran her card through the slot, surprised to find that the computer still welcomed her into the NYU premises. Nothing seemed to have changed in the long white hallways decorated with paintings and self-serve computers. She followed the silver-lined numbers along the walls, the sounds of her footsteps bouncing off the sterile corridors. The tiny echoes reminded her of the hall of Grand Central Station and deep underneath, the barred cages where the clink of keys reminded its inhabitants of a freer life in greater boxes, corridors and street tunnels waiting just outside.

She ran her fingers along the window frames, which no longer had much function in the windowless

hallways, other than for sitting or putting your bags on. She turned a corner and went down an escalator, which struck her as familiar. She had walked in a circle. At the end of the descending stairs, she turned to the right into another white windowless open lounge, where people sat on couches or walked by.

Sitting on one of the couches, Sera recognized the woman with the short, blond hair, the thin back, and the long legs comfortably outstretched. She was fully absorbed in a book. Sera froze. Stepping toward the woman, she found it hard to stop. It would be so easy to step away, back into the world of incense, prayers, meditation, and music, and not return to any of this. She already longed for that peace she had found. It didn't seem to belong to this place. Whatever change would follow, it would always have been worth it. Maybe she had never belonged to this world, and feeling like a stranger now only made her realize that maybe there had never been anything for her there, among the books, papers, and thoughts of the learned ones. It was a wisdom, which could never exceed the rational, because all the focus of the inner worlds had been taken away. People would never venture to find new questions to ask, new answers to give. There was fear, which couldn't be challenged unless things were addressed in different ways.

The first thing, she noticed was how tired Selma looked, when she suddenly got up from her seat and looked over her shoulder at Sera. Then Sera noticed the smile on Selma's lips, which she couldn't conceal. Sera waved her hand, unsure if she should smile too. They had not talked, since the day Selma had sent her away.

"Hi, Sera," she said and walked to her.

Sera lingered on her spot, nervous, just about to run for a hideout. They stood opposite each other, studying, taking notice.

"You look different", Selma said. "How are you?"

"Good," Sera said and looked down, exhausted and empty.

"I haven't seen you here for so long."

There was a softness in Selma's voice, as if she had been waiting for this moment.

"I didn't know how to contact you. Your mother has called a couple of times, it seemed urgent," Selma continued.

"Mia, she must be sick from worry!" Sera exclaimed.

"Where have you been?"

"Away...it's possible in this world, I've discovered."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you some other time," Sera said and shuffled uneasily from foot to foot.

"I need to come and pick up the rest of my belongings, one of these days. When is the best time for you?" Sera asked and looked at Selma. "I assume you'll become somebody else's mentor now."

Selma ignored her pointed remark.

"Where do you live now?" she asked instead of answering her question.

“Underground, downtown,” Sera answered shortly.

“Underground? What do you mean?”

Sera shrugged.

“Below the Underground in the middle of nowhere, among walls of rocks and concrete like everyone else.”

Selma shook her head.

“Whatever. Come back. We have studies to do. I’m alone up in Inwood. I don’t know what I said before you left, but I didn’t mean it. I’m better now. Like you said, I’m your mentor and it’s about time you come back, don’t you think?”

“We’ll see,” Sera said and smiled. “I’ll give you a call this week. Study well!”

Sera walked to the other end of the lounge. She knew where she had to go now.

“Sera!! But how can I reach you?” Selma yelled over the floor. She looked scared, like an abandoned child.

Sera didn’t answer, just shrugging her shoulders. They had not touched. They were like two bodies inside space suits floating in dead space. The image made her smile. *At least, she seems to be off the pills*, Sera thought as she walked down another corridor and found the teacher’s office she was looking for. Standing in front of the door in the empty corridor, staring at the silver plate, which read Professor Uummy, she wondered what she was doing. He was her favorite teacher. He would understand what she had experienced, why she had neglected her studies. Her sweaty fingers held onto a used copy of “The Prophet”, she had purchased at a market. She had never listened to words that spoke so highly about the human spirit, so poetically. She had brought it for him, but felt it might have been a mistake.

She loitered in front of his door for a long time until she put her ear gently up against the door. It was made out of some thick, hard material that resembled wood, but very little sound seemed to permeate the molecules of this material. It was not like their old wooden house on the hill, where the walls thin from the wear of time made it possible to hear each other’s breath. Sera closed her eyes and focused on her Visuddha to listen for any voices. She remembered his stoic, dark face, which hid the softness and mildness that his voice conveyed. He had big hands, like paws, protective and warm. At first, she didn’t hear anything, could only see his face in her mind. Then, she picked up two different muffled sounds. A woman and a man. Their words were about love, misunderstood, dormant. They were lovers, she sensed.

Sera suddenly moved away from the door and the voices; ashamed. *What am I doing?* she thought. She started running towards the exit doors and didn’t stop before she reached them. “I can’t do it yet!” she whispered to herself. *How can I be a psychologist, when I can enter their minds? Am I really hearing them, or is it voices from some other place?*

Once her heart and breath had found a calmer pace, she started walking again, heading for her next

destination. She walked through the West Fourth Market, past shops, stands and cafes and caught an A to Canal Street, where she had gone only two weeks before with the lady who had reminded her of Grandma Ea.

She had often thought about her, sometimes waking up in a guilt-ridden sweat from strange, disturbing dreams. Sometimes, she looked like Ea, at other times she had her own face, but she always knew who she was. Had she really done her best? What could she have done? Sometimes, there was nothing that could be done. Sera hoped that when she got back to Clara's house, it would all be back to normal.

She followed the Canal tunnel to Varick, where she went on to less populated street tunnels until arriving at the black door and the sandy staircase. It was quiet inside the bubble. She looked for the bird's nest, and saw the flutter of wings. There were still traces of people's footprints on the sandy ground. They formed small paths to the different houses. She followed the one to Clara's house, hoping the prints were hers. She rang the bell. It took a long time before she could finally hear somebody inside.

Tony opened the door.

"Sera, you have come back! So good to see you, we thought they had taken you too," Tony exclaimed and took her into his arms in a big warm hug.

"I am so happy to see you, we were so worried. We thought you didn't have anything to do with any of this, so"

"What's going on, Tony?" Sera finally asked, as she got out of his embrace and was inside, taking off her shoes.

"Come on in and we'll tell you. Albert is here too. Albert! ... We came back the other week," Tony said, as they went into the big living room. Albert came running down the stairs.

"Sera! How wonderful!"

Soon she was in Albert's arms, and they all looked at each other for one awkward minute.

"Sit down. We'll make you a cup of tea. What have you been doing? They didn't get hold of you, did they?"

Sera was about to burst with anticipation, but she had to wait another five minutes for the tea, while she told them what she had been up to.

"What happened that day?" Tony asked when they were all seated at the table.

She told them what she had heard from the attic and seen when she came out from her hiding place that same night.

"Where is she now?" Sera asked.

"We don't know. There are so many rumors thriving around here, we don't know what to believe anymore," Albert said.

"We think she is still being held at their quarters. They are looking for one of the head people behind

the Greenwich meetings that is said to take place following the Greenwich Market. Some people say that they have expelled her from the city on the grounds that she is the head person behind an organization that is a threat to the peace of the city," Tony said.

They both looked very serious, and Sera couldn't believe it was all true.

"The worst story that is being told is that she was put away by the Keepers. We don't believe that could have happened." Tony looked at Sera and smiled.

"But it's such good news nothing happened to you, and you found a place to stay. I can't help but think what would have happened if we all had stayed behind, perhaps we could have prevented it all from happening. But how were we to know how serious a turn it would take?" Tony said.

"Yes, we are all devastated, heartbroken. Clara was our mother and protector. And we weren't there when she needed us ...," Albert sighed loudly and took a sip of his tea.

Sera had remained quiet all the time, listening, trying to do her best to understand what had happened. She was on her way again, walking through the Varick tunnel on her own, when she realized that Clara might not be coming back, and tears welled from her eyes. More than ever there was a reason for her to carry through her idea.

The walls of the St. Mark's street tunnel which ran down the eastern part of the city had been painted in neon colors and it lit up the place in a wildly distracting way. Some people hung out in corners and notches. They were mainly young people her age. What they did to pass time wasn't clear, only that they did pass time. Their eyes showed no sparkle or enthusiasm, just absence. There was no dark or light in their eyes. Sera couldn't tell if they were sad or happy.

She was meeting Doru at the Astor marketplace, where people came to skate or skateboard. She was late. The tea with Albert and Tony had taken longer than she had planned. It had been hard to leave that house and the knowledge of what had happened. Right now there was nothing they could do but wait, they had agreed on. But soon something would happen Sera knew instinctively. She couldn't let it pass like that.

They had made the grounds and walls smooth so that the small wheels would glide easily. They had made additional passages alongside the market for people who wanted to avoid the rolling traffic. Sera maneuvered her way through the movement and velocity into the middle of the market, where they had erected a big waterless concrete fountain. They were meeting there. Today, he was waiting for her. He smelled of summer, his skin salty.

"Where would you like to go?" he asked, his face beaming from the kissing and hugging.

She always felt revived when they touched. And she always forgot about her concerns. She was happy for a moment. In his presence, there was joy. She was free to be the precious woman she had inside.

"Somewhere we can be ourselves. I'm a little tired of this place!"

He looked at her contemplatively, and nodded with a grin on his face. Then he spoke softly, almost invisibly.

“I hope you’re not too tired.”

When he started walking, she took his hand and moved with him, as if she was blind and he her guide. For a long time, neither of them said anything and just as she began to feel restless from walking in the St. Mark’s street tunnel, which seemed to go on endlessly, he spoke again.

“Somewhere in the scriptures it is said that in order for the individual to reach enlightenment, he or she has to go through various levels of consciousness. It isn’t always sweet. Some karma can be eliminated by mere practice of tapas. The cause and effect cycle is hard to catch up with unless we discipline ourselves. One of the levels is awareness of such inner obstacle which derive especially from fears of abandonment, of failure, of life and death. In other words, of attachments to Maya, the world of illusions and matter.”

Sera had heard those things before, but every time was a new experience, something new to learn. The things she learned were layers upon layers of which she could never get to the bottom. It felt the same way when she made love to him; when she took him into the heart of her, and opened his eyes and hands to her body. There were always deeper places to go to. She listened carefully, and forgot to watch. His legs were longer and faster than hers. It took a lot of focus for her to keep up with him. She forgot that they were walking, forgot about NYU and bumping into Selma and listening on Professor Ummy’s thoughts. She forgot about Clara and the terrible things that might have happened to her.

It felt like her dreams; the ones that took her to other places; into worlds of her own creation, where she could die and rise again endlessly. She was aware that the whole universe, merely a small reflection in her irises, was in fact greater and wider than the world she held within. She was only a microscopic part of it. In light of this revelation, there were so many more opportunities presenting themselves to her. The reflections in the water of her body were merely the ripples of something greater and larger than her, yet part of her. And like flowers they unfolded, white, red, pink, yellow, even blue. She could not comprehend the variety that presented itself to her. It was unfamiliar and yet it had always been there; a knowledge unavailable to her until now.

Doru suddenly stopped walking, and Sera noticed there was hardly room enough for the two of them to walk side by side. The light left in the narrow tunnel came from behind them and effaced their shadows. It struck Sera odd that there was any light at all, since she hadn’t seen any lamps or bulbs for a while. The air was damp and clammy, and that familiar smell of the train tracks suddenly hit her nose and made her nauseous. Sera squeezed his hand.

“Where are we, Doru?”

“I’ve been walking these tunnels for so many years. I wonder for what reason they were built; was it to keep people from walking off the beaten track? I have a feeling that people had a particular usage in

mind for these tunnels. Anyway, I go here when I need to meditate, or when I get caught up in too many unending, unchanging issues of this world. When I can't find any solutions, any compassion or understanding in myself, I find it here. I can go beyond my fears and attachments here. I meditate on death and immortality here, on the true reasons why I'm here."

"I'm afraid," she replied and felt distant from him and his thoughts.

He turned to her. There was still light enough to see his face. It wasn't filled with anger or irritation, as she half expected, but tenderness. He fell silent. Inside she heard his voice:

<sera. magnificent woman. don't be afraid, you've always been in the light of all, and you will know this again>

"I heard you," Sera said and frowned.

He hushed her to stay quiet.

"Some things are not supposed to be spoken. In its own time," he whispered and touched her face gently.

"Even deep within the darkest nook we can find enlightenment. Sometimes it is easier to find or recognize the inner light here than where light seems to burn in profusion. The mind gets so easily distracted by the peripheral."

There was silence for awhile, when a sound echoed through the low ceilings. The shock of the sound wave made her drop to her knees. Doru went down on his knees too and looked at her, his face calm and lightly amused.

"Sound travels mysteriously here. It may come from far away. It is probably a rat or some other creature," he said and took her hand.

Sera felt her heartbeat go back to normal. He kissed her face softly and dryly.

"Close your eyes and look at yourself. Go deep within where it seems only to be darkness. Deep inside there is peace and calmness. There is no fear or longing, no good or evil, no stress or sounds ...," he whispered and paused.

She tried to find that place he was speaking of. She imagined it could exist. Her mind and feelings confused her, distracted her, as if they were competing, eagerly wishing to fill up every atom in her.

"When you find it, hold onto it for as long as you can. When you find that place even if it is only for a second, you know your way to the divine light in you."

Sera opened her eyes and a dank, smelly darkness embraced her. She couldn't see any light other than the one that seemed to come from him. It puzzled her, yet not enough to question it. Light and darkness. Complementary. Two sides of the same world.

"How can you know that I will find it?" Sera asked.

She was cold and tired. She felt unsafe again, now that her eyes were open, looking into the dark corridor and imagining what could be in there.

"I sense you will. The most important thing is that you know or believe it," he answered.

"We can go now if you like. I have no more to show you," he added.

"Yes, let's go back," she said.

They started walking, their hands braided, their silent faces focusing on finding the way back through the corridors. Their minds quiet, their hearts one beat.

o o o

It took Matthew as long to decide what clothes to wear, searching his room-size closet, as it would have taken her to do a brief meditation. He wasn't quite himself. She was finally going to meet the man that Matthew so mysteriously had avoided talking about for so long, yet his presence in Matthew's life was very strong she sensed. The rented long, black evening dress made of a shiny, heavy material felt cool on her skin. She felt clumsy moving about in it, but didn't tell him. He had told her he liked it a lot; that it looked good on her, and he had paid for it. She couldn't object. She didn't have that kind of money.

"Soledad, why is it that you always look so beautiful? No matter what I wear, I always look so thin and sickly...." Matthew let his arms fall to the side, giving up. "This is impossible," he added and looked at Soledad for help. But since he didn't get a response quickly enough, he continued.

"What do you think?"

"You could wear a plastic bag, and I'd still see you, a beautiful, brave man. Let's go now. We're late, my love."

"Are you patronizing me?" Matthew's eyes got that spark in them.

Soledad shook her head looking into his eyes searching for something to link them, but had to take his hand instead.

"What are you afraid of love? Don't you want to go?"

The spark went away and she could feel him again with her, not focusing on the pain, which she knew he couldn't share with her. Not yet.

A lot of people were still being let in to Grand Central Hall. Soledad was happy to be wearing an evening dress now. It was easier to be anonymous that way. She didn't want anyone from the office to recognize her, the copy room girl, in case they had been invited to the same party. It was after all a big party for the Ustodians and associates.

On a small stage at one end of the great hall a swing band was playing. A few people were already on the dance floor, which was fenced in by tables around the stage. Most people clustered around each other,

or near the bars, which were situated in the middle and on the sides of the hall. It was a different crowd from what she was used to. Although most people were chatting, laughing, and drinking, an undercurrent of fiery energy dominated the place, as if underneath them a volcano could erupt anytime.

She held onto Matthew's hand as they moved to the middle of the hall where the round bar was located. The high vaulted ceiling was decorated with the sky of the Zodiac signs. She thought it a little ironic that they had never changed the decoration. It was a deep blue and green, and she thought it seemed so misplaced under the dirty yellow giant columns, staircases and walls. They walked along the edges of the big dance floor. *Heavenly mother, creator of all, destroyer of all, give me strength, take the fruits of the things I do*, Soledad sang in her mind while following Matthew, who would stop once in a while to say hello to people. Sometimes, he would introduce her; at other times, she felt he would deliberately ignore her. This was his world. These were the creators of this town. They did a good job. Like mothers, they protected their children with a steady hand, so that they would or could never leave them. They had taken on the role of motherhood; but did they do their tasks from the heart, or did they take on other roles when no one was looking?

They finally came to the bar, and Soledad found a chair. She was exhausted, unused to the energy of the place and the many people. She guessed about 300 people had come, though the hall could hold many more. Curiously, though there was plenty of space for people to spread out, they still stayed in clutters using only half of the hall.

"I guess this is the exclusive class of Manhattan?" Soledad asked, her question sounding more like a statement.

Matthew didn't say anything. They were miles apart. She touched his hand.

"I'm nervous," she said.

"Why? It's just a party, honey!" he said and looked around, his gaze never fixed on one point, just meandering.

"Could you get me some water, Matthew?"

"Sure," he answered, kissed her briefly and walked over to the bar.

On the way, he stopped to talk to a tall, skinny woman with short blond hair wearing a long, sleeveless, blue evening dress. She carried herself proudly with fashionable style. It was an unusual sight in New York where women would disappear in the crowd as if afraid of showing their womanhood, their beauty.

Soledad fell deeper into the chair and looked at the moving, noisy crowd around her. She hadn't seen so many different colors and different fabrics for a long time, not since she was a kid. It was a delight to the eye. She felt again like the little girl with the matches only she wasn't outside in the rain, her hands and face pressed tightly up against the window glass. She had come inside. Despite the sheer joy of looking at the richness and elegance, she wished she was back in the rain, where she could feel real. Here her body

felt nothing, it was all the same numb feeling. People were like shadows on the walls. Images drawn to please the eye. Mere appearances.

She scanned the crowd for a long while before she spotted Matthew. He was talking to a shorter man, his face full of wrinkles. Each of them held a glass of alcohol in their hand. His gray hair didn't stand out as much as the vibrancy and youthfulness of his limbs which could have been that of a yogi's. He radiated self-assurance and confidence. Next to this man Matthew faded, lost his energy. There wasn't even an energetic struggle between the two men, and she knew Matthew had so much power in him. Was this what Matthew held onto so tightly? It could destroy him in the end.

Matthew caught her gaze and called her over with his hand. She moved slowly through the crowd, with her heart between her hands pounding wildly like a storm. It suddenly stopped, when she found herself shaking hands with this man, looking into his violet eyes.

"My father, Peter Ferguson," Matthew said. "Soledad Miguel, father."

"So you are Soledad," Peter said with very little surprise in his voice. "I've been meaning to pay you a visit in the copy room. That is where you work, right? But things have been hectic these days. We have a lot to deal with on the twelfth floor."

Soledad fell silent, nodding her head approvingly as if she was taking orders from a superior. She cast sidelong glances to Matthew whose quietness made her nervous, his eyes pleading.

Is it happening now? So soon? Have the fruits already ripened? Heavenly Mother give me strength, give me light to see! Soledad thought.

"I see I didn't realize you were working for the Ustodians..." she replied not giving away that she knew who he was. She could smell it. He was burdened by a secret. She knew their names. It couldn't be hidden from people working inside the walls of the Ustodians. There were six of them, but she only knew their names. Very few had access to any other kind of information concerning them. They kept to themselves, probably for a good reason.

What are they hiding? she thought.

"So how do you like the new job?" Peter asked self-assured, as if he knew. She felt there was more to him. He wanted something from her. He was trying to corner her like a wild animal.

"They couldn't find you something more interesting with your qualifications?" he asked with a grin.

She ignored his attempt to patronize her.

"It's a job. It pays my rent. That's all I need."

What does he know? she thought and felt unsafe. *Have they let me in for a reason? Do they know where I come from? Is the Center in danger or are things really changing?*

The blond woman with the sleeveless evening dress, whom she had seen earlier on, approached them and whispered something into Matthew's ear, which made him laugh. From close up Soledad noticed her glossy eyes and painted lips. She was younger than she had expected, only in her early twenties. The

woman smiled and Matthew introduced her to everyone as Miss Selma Svenson. They ran off like small children toward the dance floor. Soledad felt tired and hot.

“Can we sit down somewhere?”

“Are you all right?” Peter asked with concern in his voice.

She wondered how it was possible to be so many faces.

“Yes, I’m just tired,” Soledad said and felt worse, on the verge of tears.

She wanted to run, far away where there was real air and trees, where she could at least feel the presence of the sky. Blue. Blue waving air, her favorite color. Blue so deep it gave her wings to fly.

They found a table and two chairs. She felt his eyes glued on her, observing her with judgment, but finding no answers. The grin had left his lips and he looked almost bewildered.

“You are a very beautiful woman, Soledad,” he started, more puzzled by his sudden compliment than she was. His voice was deep and serious.

“What are you looking for Dr. Ferguson?” her voice quivered slightly.

She felt more courageous now that she was sitting down.

“What? ...,” he lingered for a second, looking about him.

“Yes, I guess it’s obvious...I mean I’m not trying to seduce you or even...what I want to say is ...”.

He looked embarrassed and irritated at the same time, like a little boy unable to communicate what he wanted.

“Soledad, I need your help,” his words were clear this time.

As he spoke, there was a short break in the music, but she was still uncertain of what she had heard.

“How can I help you?” she finally asked.

She sent out all of her loving energy. She had a feeling that wherever he came from, people didn’t ask strangers for help, let alone a woman. The man opposite her had lost the stature and hardness she had initially felt, when Matthew had been there. Peter looked around again.

“My son is very sick. It doesn’t really show. They don’t know what it is...we don’t know...he, I need”

Suddenly a woman's scream broke through the music and the noises of people. Everyone’s eyes were directed toward the dance floor. Peter got up in a rush and moved toward the crowd with firm steps, stopping to see what had happened. Soledad halted behind him.

“The Med!” somebody yelled.

She quickly lost track of Peter, but steered through the rising crowd with difficulty. Like vultures above the prey, people gathered. The Med people came very fast, as if they had been waiting outside the doors. The crowd blocked her way. Finally she spotted Peter as he was leaving with the Med people, who carried what looked like Matthew away on a stretcher.

He is very sick, she thought. It’s happening so soon. I have to see George and the others. I feel it.