

Part 6

*Mind's nature is Buddha from the beginning.
It has neither birth nor cessation, like space.
When you realize the real meaning
of the equal nature of all things,
to remain in that state without searching is meditation.*

Dilgo Khyentse/Tibetan Buddhist Teaching

XVI

Near the door of the common room where people made their entrance, as if carefully planned, a small statue of Shiva greeted them and made sure that people took care of each other, and minded their pace to avoid any pushing. He had one leg raised and the other stood on the small demon-like body of ignorance. He had all of his four arms raised, as if dancing, and his four faces were smeared in white ashes. In the center of his foreheads, the third eye pierced through the soul, ready to bring grace or destruction.

Sera and Soledad had been the first to pass the Gracious One and look him in his many eyes. They sat around one of the tables surrounded by the light orange and olive green walls of the room, watching people gather around them. Silently they inhaled their hot herb tea, deep in contemplation, inspired by Shiva's third eye. Under the table their hands were still entwined like vines passionately climbing a wall.

Soledad had taken her hand, when they were inside the maze of passages leading to the center. She had felt safe again then. It felt like walking home. She took Sera's hand, as they moved past the damp, naked walls toward the black door and the warm, friendly kitchen and rooms of incense, gods and yogis. This was where she belonged. Here with Sera. Somehow all other things mattered very little at this moment. She was running under the open sky again. All around her the green, proud mountains of her childhood surrounded her. She was home. *Sera, Sera*, she sang to herself within her own four walls.

"Sera", she whispered in the dim light unable to keep it inside any longer.

They had stopped and looked at each other, close almost touching.

"You..." Soledad stammered.

"Can I kiss you?" she whispered afraid of the moment of closeness, yet drawn to Sera's smell, her skin and glow. Even with her eyes closed, it seemed that Sera looked right through her. Sera's touch charged her with delight.

Their tongues touched in an ever so gentle caress, and danced with sweetness and softness. Soledad put one hand around Sera's neck, and another stroked her cheek and jaw. Soledad felt tears come to her eyes. But then it all stopped, like a gust of wind passing, when Sera pulled away.

"I have never kissed a woman," Sera said and looked confused.

"Nor have I," said Soledad. "It was very lovely."

Soledad still felt the strong presence of what had been between them in the passage. It was as though their hands kept them together in union. She wanted to kiss her again, but realized Sera wasn't ready. And she couldn't talk to her about it. The quietness that embraced them felt like the right thing.

Soledad had never thought much of spoken words. Language was so conditioned by desire, and often it distracted people from what was truly the essence. Language would so easily manipulate with its carriers and its recipients and would block the natural flow of intuition. It encouraged codes rather than honesty from a compassionate heart. It encouraged demands and intellectual meanings. It rarely brought about the inspiration for a higher truth. Language was merely a tool; however, a tool that often would take over, leaving no space for the other senses in the body. The hand was connected to Anahata, and they formed a perfect line to the energy of compassion and intuition, the only part that could truly ever connect people to one another.

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Sera opened her eyes, when she heard the voice of Hans. She could hear his voice now, since he had revealed his secret to her. Now she could trace him, wherever he was. It was no fun to play hide and seek with her anymore. Sera had been sitting with Soledad at the table for a while. It had been so quiet, so comforting. She felt warm from their embrace and their hands connecting. She let go of Soledad's hand when Hans sat down between the two women.

He looked back and forth at the two and smiled, as Sera spoke.

"How are you?"

Hans smiled again. He rarely spoke much around people other than Sera. Words were very precious to him and he always saved them for special occasions. George had spoken of the value of words and told them that every word they spoke was energy, a commitment to something higher, and what was spoken should be from the heart, so the Universe would benefit from it.

Hans was so familiar with these things that she wondered where he had truly come from. It was almost as if he had come from another planet, or if angels existed he was one of them. Charlie believed in angels. Even Clara and Rami had talked about spiritual guides. She had always liked the idea, but it hadn't occurred to her, if she believed in them. Maybe that wasn't as important as how she felt. But she still didn't know how she felt. There were too many thoughts and voices occupying her body. There were so many new things she had never done or even thought about doing until she joined the Center and had lived among these people of ancient thoughts that exceeded the known. Though these thoughts also sprang from the intellect, they still demanded a different presence.

She hadn't gone back to the university since she'd bumped into Selma. They had talked over the phone, awkwardly, hesitantly; much like this instant sitting in front of Soledad silently, not knowing if she liked the intimacy between them or not. In the mean time, Sera felt a growing gap which she had not intended there to be. She had never been so close to a woman before. Something wasn't quite right, yet it made perfect sense; the sweetness and lightness of their kiss. No man could ever give her that kind of attention, no man could ever reach that far into her, knowing how to step and how to touch. Only a woman could have that kind of insight. It was a gift. Soledad had revealed something to her that she couldn't yet grasp fully. What Soledad could give so freely and lightly, she lacked desperately with Selma. Meeting Soledad was one of many new worlds into which she had ventured, like taking care of Hans, being with Doru, meeting Clara and Rami, and stepping away from Selma and NYU. Something was budding in her, and it left her vulnerable.

"When is the meeting?" Sera asked and broke the silence between them.

"Soon, I think I wonder what will happen," Soledad said.

"I miss the light, especially now that I know we can get to it!" Sera exclaimed and sighed.

"This is just the beginning, my love. I feel it. Changes are coming," Soledad's face lit up.

"Tell a story, will you?" asked Hans and looked at the two women again.

"I know a story," Soledad said, "more ancient than the birth of humanity." Soledad looked at Sera and Hans, and paused.

"Well, do you want to hear it?"

They both nodded in response. Soledad closed her eyes before she started speaking.

"In India, they say that the creation of this world, this universe, was a sacrifice. They say that this universe goes through cycles, four of them, just like the body goes through its cycles, baby to boy to man to dying to return to be reborn. And long before we came into being, before even the gods came into being, before existence itself, there was only the mind and pure thought, which didn't even know of its own existence," Soledad paused.

She looked at her spectators with wonder, as if she had just discovered the thought.

Other people around the room listened in to her story.

"Out of the mind, transformation happened and for transformation to happen a sacrifice had to take place. But the transformer and the transformed were one and the same, so you see it wasn't an easy birth. The first thing that occurred was the transformation of the thought into the self, into Atman. That self and mind was Prajapati, the father, the first which came to be. Prajapati came to sacrifice himself in order to create the world with its Gods and human beings. He transformed the silence of thought into dark and light, death and life, hot and cold, a reality so different from the spirit and mind. A reality of opposites.

"The first thing Prajapati created was water. The whole world, which was Prajapati, was one fluid entity, all movement, like the mind. Then inside of the water, a golden shell took shape, and inside of it a

fire. Out of that fire, also known as desire, came the word, and Prajapati found the syllables for earth, air and sky, and knew their existence, their names. To create earth, he dove to the bottom of the waters, where he found mud, which he brought with him to the surface and smeared on a lotus leaf. When the mud dried, he fenced it off with white stones. This was earth. Then he laid down on the earth and his body became one with the elements. After earth, he created Agni, a fire which burns and radiates from within. When he discovered the word he created the gods, thirty-one to begin with, and for a while he wasn't alone. He was surrounded by his children. But after some time, the gods and goddesses, his children took off to the sky and left him alone on earth to listen to the winds and the fire within while he continued creating. Now death, who he had created himself, was the only other being left with him. Their relationship turned out to be a hard one and for a long time he struggled with death, barely able to win. In the end, however, he learned that what the mind sees it sees forever and so if it wishes, there is no death, only to the body. And Prajapati knew he could never lose to death.

"When he was exhausted from loneliness, struggle, and the making of the world, he saw a beautiful, perfect white horse. Uccaihsravas they call it. It was a vision that appeared above the waters, and it made him wonder about creation, and being the creator. He hadn't created this vision, and it sprang out of creation itself, like an echo. He had sacrificed himself to create the world and his children, the gods and goddesses, who had soon forgotten all about their father. And it would go on like that for a long time. It was not until much, much later when somebody tried to go back to the beginning that they remembered him, and yet it was only as a shapeless, faceless figure. The passing of time had washed away the memory of the beginning of time, of the sacrifice." Soledad paused again and put her hands, which had been resting in her lap, on the table.

"I believe this story is to remind us that one of the greatest challenges in life is to rediscover that beginning in ourselves, remembering where we come from, and how we came to be. And realize that we are the creators of our life too. We are part of the cycle. There was a time in which we came to be in this body, and we should always listen and look for that echo or vibration."

"When did he create human beings?" Hans asked.

"That is a whole other story, which will have to wait," Soledad replied to the boy.

"Please, tell another one," Hans pleaded.

"No, one is enough." Soledad said and smiled. "Perhaps Sera knows a story?"

Sera shook her head.

"I'm afraid I don't. I was never good at telling stories. But I did write poetry once, a long time ago," Sera said. As she said this she felt a sudden idea for a poem come to her. It was about Soledad, what she brought her.

"Really? I didn't know."

"Have you ever written anything, Soledad?" Sera asked.

Soledad shook her head.

"I used to think I was going to be the great artist," Sera added.

"Don't you write anymore?" Soledad said.

"No. I wanted to be intelligent and bright. I thought writing poetry would show intellect and insight. Then I began looking for all the sensible things to do, like a proper career. You know. Psychology was so easily accessible because of my mother. I already knew so much from her. And if you do well in that field you can make money. I swore to myself that I would be good. You see my mother never made a lot of money. She works for the public, for the poor..." Sera paused and looked at Soledad for a glimpse of a second, remembering.

"I always thought she was unhappy, but maybe she wasn't. She often let them get free sessions and could hardly pay her own bills, and she has brought me up on her own since father died..." Sera paused again, realizing how life seemed to be a journey downwards or outwards, whichever perspective you chose.

"She's been very sick, my mother..." Sera hadn't thought about Mia for so long.

They used to talk about everything in that creaky house on the hill which her father had renovated and rebuilt. It was an old house from long before the 20's, the big changes and her grandparents' disappearance.

Soledad looked at her.

"How is she now?"

Sera shrugged her shoulders.

"Is there some family there to be with her?"

"Not really. We haven't heard from my grandparents for years. They travel and teach."

Yoga, she thought and knew that they were all right. Mia had asked her if she could try trace them down in the city. Maybe they had come to this part of the world. Sera hadn't found anything that suggested they had come to the States. That kind of information had turned out to be harder to get access to in this city than at home. She'd needed to present some kind of documentation of her grandparents, which she didn't have. She could only document her own existence with papers.

"You know, George can always help. He was taught about healing herbs," Soledad said.

They all fell silent around the table.

"Go ask him, Sera. I am sure he will help if he can," Soledad said encouraging.

Her face lit up with an angelic lucidity.

"Have you heard any news about Matthew?" Sera asked.

Soledad shook her head sadly, remembering. It had been three days. Nobody had answered his phone, and she didn't dare go back to the Ustodians' headquarters now, at least for a while. She'd had to take some time off. Employees working directly for the Ustodians always had almost ten weeks of time off from work. She had worked long hours to complete her meditations. The past three days had been long,

waiting for an uncertain phone call, so she had spent most of her time at the center. In the company of Sera, George, and Hans, the cloud of uncertainty that filled her heart eased. Her meditations became easier, and she felt happier. Everything in life seemed to be layers upon layers; there to be uncovered, dug under, but the layers were bottomless. She had to unwrap herself again and again to get to the core of being, and yet new levels kept arising.

She missed the calmness she used to have when everything was still fresh and new, and she had the support of older, more experienced yogis. Now she was one of them, there to help others and to use the abilities she had developed. The pupil had turned into the teacher. But what should she do with all the obstacles which seemed to accumulate in her life? It was becoming harder to detach herself. She missed him for the brief moments they had spent together. There were things she was only beginning to see now which were waiting for her on the other side of some doorway. He had come like a storm after calmness. She felt herself being carried further and further into the unruly waters where she once came from. There was a risk she might fall in again like she had done before, but she had always come back stronger. Peril was a mirage of the mind. An imaginative obstacle constructed by the mind. There was no place to fall, except from where she had already been. Living freely was letting go, not holding onto.

"He'll be back," said the little boy beside her, whom she hardly knew, but whose quiet eyes she trusted in.

"I know," Soledad said, comforted by the words, and smiled. *If not soon, then I can wait.*

Over thirty people had gathered in the common room, which had reached its maximum. There was a calm buzzing of people embracing, touching, talking or simply meditating. They sat for a while in silence and looked at people. Sera found a piece of paper, which words flowed like water onto through the pen in her hand. With the words came a revelation, which Soledad saw in Sera's face, as she looked up, when she finished writing. Sera gave her the piece of paper without hesitation.

*From your soft, velvet eyes
emanate a bright light
I'm spellbound by its slivers,
that fill me with soft kisses of the skin,
and with affinity, envelop me
in a cloak of dreams and reveries.*

*In your crystal eyes
I behold myself, for the first time
freed from the many entangled webs
my mind weaves in dark morning hours,
and I see why the true tales of this world
are left untold, over and over.*

*With rays of sun in your hair
you come to me, your eyes unclothed by grace
petal over petal, gently
you reveal the unfathomless seed in me
to awaken what was forgotten
but can never perish.*

"You write beautifully, Sera. Thank you. I love it," Soledad said.

For a moment, there was only the two of them in the room, and they spoke softly.

When Doru showed up as the very last, Sera got up, and kissed him. Soon he left her to go back to Soledad and Hans, while he moved around from table to table, room to room. Soledad noticed how Sera rarely took her eyes off him, following him wherever he went, anticipating a return of a glance, but he was for the most part deeply involved in whomever he spoke to. Soledad knew it wasn't disinterest. Doru was following his inner duties, his devotion to helping people. But it wasn't her job to tell Sera. It was his.

The room fell into peaceful meditation, when George entered.

"I'm glad to see so many of you here," he said and gazed at the faces of the people gathered around him.

"We need all of your energies. I assume you all know by now, why I called for this meeting. I know, we have all worked hard and long to break through to the Ustodians. It takes patience, self-discipline, and meditation to do it the yogic way. We have come far without risking lives or hearts," George stopped and smiled.

"Before we start hearing what has been going on and what ideas we have, let's do a short meditation on Shiva. Let him help and guide us in our pursuit of transcendence."

People sat down on the floor or on chairs, but all faced the small man with the soft-spoken words. Soledad moved from her chair to the floor, where she went into a lotus position, legs crossed and both feet resting on her thighs.

<the night sky holds the bright stars in the palm of its hand and the wind blows in her face as if sent from the illuminated windows of the city skyline. a wafer-thin moon hangs over the horizon, thinning more and more out by the minute. moving. everything is movement. even the invisible air and the dark, still night sky of stars are drifting like the grounds, she is planted on; always away from her and back again. there is no winter stillness anymore>

Somewhere, it seemed a bell rang ever so gently. Everybody was looking at George, who was sitting on a chair against one wall. He caught Doru's gaze, who moved up toward George.

"I believe Doru would like to open the meeting," George said.

Doru stood up, cleared his throat, and let his arms dangle down his sides. As always his mind rustled with nervousness. When he taught, he didn't see all the faces as one big mass directed toward him. He was part of an organism, chosen to be the voice of it, and there was a beautiful flow. God was so clearly present. On the other hand, speaking at the MOSA meetings, he had a hard time finding the flow. He'd much rather sit in a corner observing as part of the crowd; only a pawn in the game.

"Many things are happening now. The progress we are making is speeding up. I sense big changes in the coming months, so we'd better put all of our focus into the work we are doing, friends!

"Just to give you a brief update before we move on to the big news. I am still learning more and more about the Ustodians, their group and current events, and recently Soledad has been employed at the Ustodians' headquarters, where, as I understand, she has done a lot of energy work under the supervision of George. Unfortunately, the Greenwich Market meetings have been closed down for the time being. I think it was a wise choice. Two weeks ago the Ustodians did an inspection of one of the Greenwich residents, Clara, which resulted in an arrest. We believe Clara was taken to the Keepers' headquarters for questioning. They have kept her under supervision for a long time. Rumors say they might have banished her from the city. The situation is disturbing and we just can't know how far they will take things. Clara has been a great milestone in the movements working toward a better society. She has used her house as a meeting ground, a place where people like us could find a home. We hope not all hope has been lost and that soon she will return to her home."

"What were the Keepers after?" a man in the crowd asked.

"We believe they were looking for names of unregistered people and their whereabouts, especially the names of people that are in the Greenwich meetings. I also suspect they were looking for underground movements like us. Clara couldn't tell them anything, because she knows only a few names, but no locations other than the market itself."

"How did the Ustodians find her? There must have been an informer somewhere, don't you think?" a woman asked, looking worried.

"I'm afraid I can't say what caused the Ustodians to go to her. I think the Ustodians know more than they give themselves out to know. I don't know why they have kept so quiet, but it has given us the time to do our work. I feel we are making a great leap, and the arrest of Clara might prove to be to our advantage soon."

Doru paused. He had been waiting for this moment for many years.

"Well, the good news is that we have made contact with one of the Ustodians. As a matter of fact, Soledad has."

It felt like the whole crowd lost its breath. No one at the center had ever seen them or heard about anyone who had.

"What I think, we need to discuss at today's meeting is whether she should pursue any further

contact. First, Soledad, I think you should give your account of the incident.”

Soledad stood up and walked up to Doru. She cleared her throat, closing her eyes for a brief moment to gain clarity. She had been listening to Doru and paying attention to the group, their reactions and presence. She had almost forgotten about her own encounter. It took her a while to center herself in front of the group.

“His name is Peter, and I know his son very well. He is one of my students and my lover. I met Peter the other night at a big party I was invited to. Peter came to me specifically and asked for my help. He seems to know more about me, than I thought possible. I am not sure what kind of help he wants from me, but I sense this could be an important breakthrough for us. He was definitely stepping over some of his own boundaries in coming to me. I sensed a deep vulnerability in him. If I could open a link to him, create a bond, we might stir the present status quo. I will hopefully have better luck than the first time,” Soledad lingered and looked at people. Some faces were less familiar than others.

She realized that ultimately it was up to her what kind of action she took. She was only here to get the okay from everybody.

“But what if it was a temporary emotional reaction from his side? I mean, is it worth the risk now that we have come this far?” asked Linda, an older, gray haired woman.

“I think making contact is good for us, whether or not we achieve much from it at first. I think, it will plant the seeds necessary,” said Michael, the musician.

“Are you sure he is one of the Ustodians?” asked a young woman with long, black hair.

“He didn’t tell me in so many words, but I know. I know their names from work and he was introduced to me,” Soledad said and looked at George.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“I think our time is closing in on us, and we have to take action soon. We have built a foundation. We will not crumble like these walls will some day,” George said and lifted his hands toward the walls and ceilings.

The crowd was silent again.

“We know from a few sources now that the grounds are safe. They have taken clear tests for more than five years now. There is no more danger up there than here. No more than the few biological mechanisms already floating around in the Underground tunnels on the lower eastern side of the city...,” Doru paused and looked at Sera.

“I think Sera, a newcomer in our group, also has something interesting to share with us,” Doru said and smiled to Sera.

Sera quieted her mind to remember everything she wanted to say. She hadn't been prepared for making a speech. Once she started speaking, the words flowed by themselves like the poem she had written for Soledad.

"Like Doru said, the grounds are accessible for us now. I know, I have been up there," she said and pointed upward, feeling the group of people looking up in awe.

"I met two scientists that work up there. They weren't very pleased with finding me outside of my jurisdiction. They are afraid, but not of the air, as far as I sense. It's the system that makes them afraid. They arrested my friend and I and kept us barred up for one night. The following day, they let us go without any further explanation. We had violated the contamination restrictions and they punished us. We had to promise not to go up again. But what is more interesting is that there are people living underneath us. I met some of them in prison and some of them have come to live among us."

She put her hand on Hans' shoulder and felt everybody's amazement.

"I have a feeling they will be willing to join us if we can make them realize that they don't have to live down there," Sera said and pointed downwards this time.

"These people were forgotten during the Final War and even before that. I think we should go and see them, make contact with them. As far as I understand, they are a big community. There are about five hundred of them. I think we could persuade some of them to join us. They see less light than us. They have been deprived of everything. We must be able to make a connection."

Soledad smiled proudly and lovingly to Sera as they caught each other's gaze.

"I'll go with you," she said and felt the resistance of some people.

"But we don't know anything about these people!" Will exclaimed.

"What if they are all crazy! They will ruin the work we have done here," another young man said.

"The foundation we've built can't be destroyed if it's truly based on faith and trust. We mustn't forget that we are all connected through the Divine, and finding that connection is our ultimate goal..." Soledad lingered.

She was angry. How could they let fear control their judgments? Everything happened with a reason, even this. Soledad soon calmed down and noticed the reactions of the group. People were slowly waking up, no longer merely looking at George for recognition, but at the strange new girl with the long hair, the big solemn eyes, the frail bones and the skin of a goddess; humble and proud, dark and light, open and closed.

Sera's gaze sank as if exhausted from the speech. She had a good idea. Ever since her conversation with George, she knew the turns they had to make. The confidence he had put in her made her believe enough in her ideas to speak them tonight. She looked at Doru, who had sat down on the floor next to George. He smiled. She wanted his recognition, his support. Doru kept smiling from his seated position and focusing on his smile eventually made her feel a little better. Why didn't he say something though? This quiet man.

The overwhelming quietness of the group made the air sparkle. Doru felt warm within. He felt that things were proceeding the way they were supposed to. It took time to create a collective spirit, but he felt

people were ready to throw off their guards. The time was ripe. It was only a matter of waiting a little bit longer. Sera looked so beautiful in front of the group, opening her heart, and finding strength and faith to move people like she moved him beyond his deepest places.

A woman rose and spoke.

"I think Soledad has a very good point. We can't let our fears control us. I think it is time we take action and look for what God presents to us. There's a balance that has to be found in each of us. We have bowed for a long time. I'm ready to stand up," and as she finished her sentence, she stayed on her feet, as if she was ready to do something right away.

There was silence. Soledad felt the crowd stirring inside, naked and pensive. A man at the back of the room, athletic and firm, rose from his seat. He was a survivor of the Final War and a lot older than most of the people gathered. His voice was agitated, but the rest of his body calm.

"When they still constructed their bombs, other lethal weapons and what have you, they said it was in the name of security and peace. Who's to say what is safe and what's not. In the end it is up to the Universe what will happen and if we don't surrender, it will make us surrender."

More and more people stood up and shared their opinion and experiences. Some cried, and some felt the urge to raise their voices out of the feelings they had carried within. Soon a consensus had been reached. There were whispers of change in the air like leaves changing colors in the windy, brisk fall, and a rush of joy ran through the crowd.

At the end of the meeting, after a practical discussion about the running of the center, Doru walked over to Sera, Soledad, and Hans at the table. He gave Sera a hug full of joy and she was again transformed by his sudden, complete presence.

"I've missed you," he whispered into her ear. He let go of her lightly and said. "Will I see you tonight?"

Maybe, she thought.

"Yes."

"Come to my place," he said and kissed her cheek.

As he moved his face to greet Soledad's face, she saw the same warmth and affection. It felt like a bee had stung her, and the sting went deeper every moment.

"Soledad, my love. How are you?" he asked and gave her a hug too. Was it Soledad or Doru who caused her this pain?

They stood hand in hand, his eyes focused on her, admiringly.

"See you soon", Sera said to Hans and kissed his cheek.

"Be good", she added.

Hans looked joyful, not a sting of worry in his world. She knew that feeling only if she searched deep, deep inside. It was a place that she could only find by herself. However standing before Soledad, she was

transported into that place without looking for it. Soledad felt soft and her skin smelled of sweetness as she finally put her arms around her. Sera drifted away, there in her arms, but whereto she didn't know. Puzzled by the complexity of her being and mind, Sera let go a little. She wanted to stop thinking, just sense for a moment spontaneously and freely. Was it honey or flowers? It was warm there like a field full of the heat and smells of summer.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Sera," Soledad whispered to her, kissing her ear.

Sera felt free within. She wondered how it felt to kiss her, beyond the softness of her lips, feeling her tender wetness, her desire entering her. Then a voice or an image interrupted her from somewhere far away.

<she makes love to him, just like me. she moans and opens her mouth slightly, then she closes her eyes to feel that rush, to keep it there in the palm of her body. then her voice increases in volume, gradually, and it brings him joy for he feels her love, her voice, her body channeling the divine, and their bodies merge to one breath, one ecstatic rush of energy. how can i ever be anything for him? Him. who is she?>

"Good night," Sera answered not showing the seamy side of her.

She looked at Soledad's face. Sera had completely lost the urge to be tender and open. She was too tired, too afraid to make a fist. It was all too puzzling to her. There were so many new voices in her life. In her childhood people's voices had been songs to her. First the healer George came to her rescue, then this stranger on the train had approached her, and finally a beautiful woman with an unusual gentleness had come to her. All three of them as it turned out knew one another closely and she was deeply involved with them both. How could she make heads or tails of it? Everything changed and moved so swiftly, like in a dream, with no control of what happened; and yet the dream was the dreamer's. Or was the dreamer the dream?

The dark didn't bother her much any longer. The weeping walls crept past them without a blink of her eyes. He was silent, his hand embraced hers. All she could think about was her anger. If he could truly read other people's minds, he would know she knew, and yet he was as calm as ever, so detached. She wanted to run, to let herself go, but to where? Who was it she was running to in her dreams? She had forgotten. Was it the sky, as blue and deep as love?

They walked to the trains. She felt eyes watching them as if she was the forbidden fruit, pleasing to look at but inside all scales, earthy and fiery poison. They sat down on a seat next to each other. The train was crowded, even this late. People weren't as still as usual. Some were talking, others simply watching each other.

“Hi Doru, how are you?” a man came walking through the doors that connected to the neighboring car. When he came closer, Sera recognized the stale green uniform, the boots and the wooden stick dangling down one side of the man’s wide hips.

“Hi Don. How are you?” Doru said in a friendly voice, which only conveyed warmth and respect.

“This is Sera. Sera, this is Don.”

She stared at the big man in the uniform. Even his jaw was square and muscular.

“Hello...,” she mumbled.

“Don and I used to work together. How are things with you?”

The seriousness in Doru’s voice scared her. From one moment to another, he would shift so dramatically. She tried to relax and think of her breathing, air going through her nose into the throat, down her esophagus, down and down, like a petite whirlwind. Her throat began to buzz again. The man, Don wasn't a machine he was surrounded by voices and inside, the faintest of them all, his. Doru took her hand. It came as no surprise to her any longer that he knew how and when to reach her.

“When are you coming back?” Don was still standing up, uncomfortably rocking from one foot to another. People were beginning to look at the Keeper with more courage, their censured and culpable eyes looking above their waistlines.

“When are you coming for a visit?” Doru’s voice responded quickly, yet with a softness that didn’t seem too pervasive.

“Man, you know that’s not possible. There’s too much at stake. They have put me on the list. I might go soon, to the science department at headquarters.” A dreamy look came over his face.

Sera could see that the man lived in a world of different dreams. She recognized a feeling that reminded her of Selma, who lived her life in bars and among books, as if that was the only part of life. Sera had seen herself for many years searching for a career, a safe and successful path that would keep her worth something like a commodity.

“Well, I’d better be going.”

The man stuck his hand out and as Doru embraced the single hand with his two, the man withdrew it as if embarrassed, yet his face was soft. A pair of dimples showed at the sides of his lips. Sera hadn’t expected to find that kind of gentleness in his face.

Don walked onto the next pair of doors, walking against the direction of the train. Where the air had been filled with the strange Keeper’s voice there was now silence. There was no longer a place for her to hide. It was invasive, almost abusive. She felt trapped. She wanted to be outside everything, not inside it. With a sudden impulse, she snatched away her hand from his and crossed her arms over her chest. She knew his face was disturbed, maybe a little puzzled.

“I just don’t understand you,” she said between her teeth, as if her voice was too exhausted to reach any higher volume.

“Let’s talk when we get home.”

She almost could have sworn his face emanated embarrassment or anger. *All this for what?* she thought. She missed the peace she’d found at the center.

o o

As Doru unlocked the door to his apartment, he thought about the day he took Sera to the Grounds. He had never told her how he was taken there when he first came to the Underground city. That was before he met George, before everything changed in his life, a lifetime ago. The air was poisonous, and they didn’t wear much protection other than the masks and heavy boiler suits. He had come to New York to study, to live. After the war, NY opened its doors for immigration and a great stream of newcomers settled down in its tomb-like metamorphosis. He was only fifteen, when he ran away from his parents’ timeworn house in the bygone mining town of Baia Mare in the Maramures Mountains where he had spend most summers and holidays, when he had been out of school. He had so many grand plans for his life, even midst the devastation of the past war and the death of his father. New York was the city of opportunities. He didn’t continue his studies as his mother had hoped he would, but ended up working for the Union of unskilled laborers, who worked on restoring and maintaining the city.

Most of the jobs he took on involved heavy lifting and drilling as they expanded the Undergrounds connecting each house to the dark corridors, which led to the trains or to the grounds. He became so familiar with the dark that his eyes could look right through it. He instantly knew his way, and the groups used him as a navigator when the dysfunctional electricity went out and they had to use torches or lanterns. Occasionally, they would go to the grounds. It was one of the rarer shifts and he knew now why, but didn’t then. His heart would leap with joy when he was chosen to go up, and he took in every moment of the world of light. It was like a hidden treasure, the blue sky, the few withering greens that stuck up here and there, and the wind. After a month in the dark corridors, the light and wind were a blessing to him.

Om, Shantih, Shantih, he chanted for himself.

He let her through the door before he started taking off his shoes. *I should tell her everything*, he thought. He was afraid for the first time in his life, dead afraid that his words would fall to the ground and all the things he had shown her, all the joy in her he had helped her to recognize, would be lost. He wasn’t used to starting all over again. Teaching was as far as he’d gotten. He had started all over once in this lifetime, and it had almost killed him. Maybe there wasn’t any hope for a united people, only for the lonely warrior.

She was looking at him. It felt like there was nothing left of him but his bones and fears. He had never before shown anyone his vulnerability. There had been no occasion. He had the sudden urge to

work or meditate. But she was here now. He had invited her.

"Tea?" he asked.

She nodded, her eyes full of tears. Tears of anger, he felt. He considered this. It was only natural for the anger to come. He hadn't explained any of his actions, hadn't told her his story. How could she be prepared for this? He had thought she would know enough to understand. But he had been running away.

He stood at the sink and felt the running water on his hands.

"The road is long and bumpy, but you're strong Doru. A fire is burning in your body. You are a lonely warrior with a grand heart. You're most comfortable being by yourself in life's struggles, but watch out! What comes to us easily, we shouldn't dwell in for too long, not until we have strengthened every part of us. Become aware. You can go far, you healed your body. You can go very far with your own fire, but in the end you too have to surrender." George's words rang as clearly as when he had been just nineteen, and George had stood in front of him in the Underground outside a deli at the Washington Market. The world suddenly looked as if wrapped in a haze again like those first painful years.

He made the tea and stepped into the living room. The sky was dark outside, the sun long gone to rest. She was sitting on the floor, her legs crossed, and on her lap, unfolded like a flower, one of his books rested. Her eyes were closed. He put the teacups on the floor and sat down opposite her. Closing his eyes, he focused his energy in on her, and little by little he felt her being, a subtle, empowering energy. *I love you*, he felt and tried to emit his love to her. *Catch*, he thought and smiled.

Her smile was reluctant, but she smiled, when they looked at each other again.

"I know nothing about you, only your love," she told him openly.

He sensed her fear and her love at once.

"I've been angry and confused. I still am you know," she corrected herself.

He nodded and closed his eyes. *Heavenly Father give me strength and clarity*, he thought and breathed slowly like he would do before teaching a class, feeling every step of it as it entered and left him again.

"When I was seventeen, I became very ill. It was the air and the life in the dark dusty tunnels of this city. The doctors gave up on me eventually. Whatever was inside of me seemed stronger than me. It behaved like cancer but for long periods it would lie dormant, untraceable. It was like an all-pervasive, destructive energy that took over my body, and I couldn't do anything but feel the most excruciating pain. It was the work I did when I first arrived here. We worked on the Grounds, cleaning and expanding the Underground. The Ustodians knew the injustice they were guilty of but they never admitted to it. Instead they gave me a job with a fat salary as compensation for the harm and many hospital visits. I was well off working as a Keeper. During my good periods I lived a pleasant and content life. I stayed away from the boosters they offered us. I had a feeling that they wouldn't do me any good."

"Sera, it wasn't just the work that caused my illness. I understood that long after. There was sadness, a painful longing in me. I was going against my true self, and my body was telling me to slow down and

take a deeper look at myself through the pain. When the body is in full balance and harmony, backed by a mature, balanced consciousness, it is strong and vital and won't create symptoms. I longed to find that balance, reach that space where we have all been and will all go, but not in the body necessarily."

He stopped speaking and took a sip of his tea. She was staring at him. She had never gone beyond, he realized. Life had protected her for some reason. She was truly pure in her spirit. *Thank you God, for showing me this part of life*, he thought gratefully.

"It was a tough job being a Keeper. It was long hours and sometimes dirty work. The Ustodians directly supervised us, though we never saw them in person. They had great plans for the city. We served them well because they gave us security and direction in life. And they paid my hospital visits and medicine when it still cost money. I believed what they did was good even though there were things I found strange, like the elimination of religious ceremonies and any kind of religious practice. Not that I had any strong beliefs at that point, but I did know that I was dying and it made me think of those issues. I understood the Ustodians' premise. History had shown the ill religion could carry to the human race. And we all wanted no more wars, no more bombs or threats. By force and infiltration we slowly changed things, or so we thought.

"Then I met George. Like you did. As if he had been sent by God. He was my angel. Simply by being with him I felt better, on my way to recovery. He helped me cure my body. It was, it is a painful journey. I have much work to do."

He took her hand and caressed it ever so gently. He could feel the blood running through her like a clear river.

"Sera, I wonder sometimes, if I am loving enough for you. I have my own ways and they are not always so gentle...."

"What do you mean?" her words left her as if her mouth was full of flour.

"I've devoted myself to a life style which to most people is alien, even obscene and criminal. I have devoted my life to finding or knowing my true nature beyond the impermanence of life. My journey in life is to know love, its spiritual and bodily manifestations. I used to wonder about what people called love. I would look around me. All these people craving to be with someone, the right person to give them all the attention and care they needed. It became so unbearably complex. All these strings attached to one another, transforming us into somebody else's fantasy or dream of reality. But you see love doesn't need an object, necessarily. It exists with or without it, whether we take time to learn to see it, and develop it in ourselves. Some say love is the only truth, there is. Some may be very open to love, but most people have to work on it, consciously learning to overcome their ego's limitations. Love is giving without expectations of receiving anything in return. Love is a state of awareness. Love is pure transformation and transmutation. That is what happens when we make love. We purify our energy, starting with the sexual," he put his hand on her pelvic bone.

"You make me feel part of the Universe through our union. You hold the key to heaven. We are two poles merging and becoming the whole, you the feminine force, earth, all which is conscious, I the masculine, sky, all which is transcendental. I discover the beauty of life through loving you," he said and paused for a little while, looking at her with tenderness.

"You probably know all this from the books and classes, already. We move and transform through our actions of love, learn to see and know love beyond the ego. And there is freedom even within the limitations of being in our body. You know, freedom isn't a physical state, it is an inner one. Nothing in the physical world is free. We are all bound by karma and death in this body, but it doesn't mean we can't transform. The most blessed journey is to transcend the illusions of the physical world by knowing them fully; being, understanding and using them to free ourselves from them."

He sensed that she was listening but not absorbing. If he couldn't show her, it didn't matter what he said. She could only go her own way. He was glad to have told her his story. He felt there was more.

"What is wrong my love?" he asked and looked at her watery eyes.

There were no words left to say now.

"Let's go to bed. We both need some sleep. We have another journey ahead of us."

He felt restful, full of love for this wonderful woman, whom he had met in such an unusual way. It seemed he had always known her. Another angel had wandered into his life. Was that why he had had the unexpected courage to approach her that day on the train, breaking all precaution rules?

The night closed in on them, wrapped them up, skin against skin as they went on their separate nocturnal travelings. Doru was always aware of her being, her body embraced by his, her soul enveloped in his heart.

The ocean stretches its gigantic arms far into the beach. It almost touches her naked feet. Her beautiful little toes that beg to be kissed and loved. We go to her ocean for the first time. This is the second time, I see the ocean. It's not like I remember. It is both quiet and playfully amorous, like the sexual expressions of a deep love.

She takes me into the water, entering the gateway to her secret garden. She shows me the reaches beyond the wavy surface. We dive further and further down. Into a blue world. I know her thoughts. She is talking of her deepest love and longings. There is no need for words in this world, all is whole. There is an understanding, an openness, and a connectedness here.

She gives me air to breathe, when there is none left in me. It enters me like bubbles of sweet light nectar with her kisses. I feel euphoric. The bubbles are like the most subtle, electrical touch and turn into hundreds of energetic explosions of refined pleasure. They ripple through me, always upwards into my head. There is no darkness in this world, no noise to keep out.

The garden is not just green as I expected, but consists of all the colors of the world. And there are shapes there, not human-made, that I haven't seen before. She tells me that this is where she sprang from once, like a

fountain. She embraces me deeply. The divine is in her eyes, her touch. A golden, bright light.

The garden surrounds us, feeds us with its richness, and I can breathe by myself again. Above I see another light, a different kind of being. It seems so strange from below. But I know that there is light everywhere now.

XVII

The light had been strangely misty outside his window. They had woken up bathed in it, an airy, cold light. Sera held that image in her mind, as she descended the stairs to the Underground. The passages were familiar, but like in a memory from a long time ago. She walked briskly and vigorously, letting the numbers guide her. She flowed down the dimly lit passages, which normally made her lips shiver. Today, she had an assignment to do for the center. Today, she was going to do her share for the Underground City. *What if the sun has left, when we can ascend from the Underground? Will we crawl back into our shelters like rats?* she thought. When she reached her old building, short of breath and excitement, she stopped in front of the tellers to breathe properly. In slowly, out slowly.

“Hello Ms. Skau,” the machine greeted her as usual.

Her card worked. They hadn’t tracked her down yet, or maybe the Ustodians never did investigate the comings and goings of its citizens. People were only made to believe so. It was a city of illusions, a mirage that turned into dust once it got under your feet.

She knocked on the door gently and waited. Her hands had turned sweaty in a few seconds. She hadn’t given apartment 5C or Selma a thought for a long time. Silence rested behind the door. She pulled out her key and opened the door slowly, as if she was a thief or a stranger. It felt like breaking through a gap into a past moment. Would she be able to change things? Or did life just change by itself? She stepped through the hallway and was surprised by Selma, who made a lament.

“Sera!! You gave me a freight!”

Seeing that Selma was still wearing her night T-shirt, Sera realized it was early in the morning, and Selma had probably just woken up.

“I’m sorry. I knocked.”

“We have a door bell for the same, you know,” Selma said and laughed.

"My key still works."

"Of course, why shouldn't it."

The two women stood opposite each other watching in wonder, as if from two separate time vacuums.

"How are you?" they both asked simultaneously and laughed.

The animosity between them was gone, and Sera laughed a little more.

"I was wondering if my room is still here?"

Selma nodded. They both walked into the room. Sera's pile of clothes and other belongings still stood the way she had left them.

"I'm going to need a bit of study help to catch up."

"Of course. Where have you been all this time?" Selma asked. "I've worried."

"Trying to save the world," Sera said lightly. "My world.... I've been good, some of Doru's friends have taken well care of me."

"Still seeing him?" Selma asked a little snidely.

Sera ignored her question.

"And what have you been up to?"

"Studying. I left Frank," she said silently. "Things are better now, less chaotic. I've been talking a lot with professor Ummy. He's been a great help."

Sera remembered standing in front of his door, afraid and then hearing the voices. What had she been so afraid of? She couldn't remember any more. Where did those fears come from?

"Yes, he is a great teacher. He knows something that the other teachers don't."

Selma's smile was genuine and warm. *What's the trick?* Sera thought.

"I'm not the only one who has been trying to get hold of you, Sera."

"I know, Mia too," Sera said.

Selma looked worried.

"She is all right!?" Sera's question sounded more like a statement.

"You'd better talk to her. Use my computer. Yours needs to be repaired, I think."

Mia's messages were short and disquieting. She set the computer for screening and soon after, out of the blackness, appeared Mia's face. She looked tired and her long, thin hair was lusterless. But she smiled, when she saw Sera's face.

"Sera! It's good to see you. How are you, my dear? I haven't heard from you for so long."

"I'm good, Mia. I'm sorry, I haven't kept in touch. So much has happened. I've started doing yoga and I've met so many wonderful, interesting people."

"Yoga?"

"Yes, it's very interesting," Sera replied.

Her mother looked worried for a while, then she smiled again.

"You always reminded me so much of Ea. It's not that much of a surprise that you'd be interested in it too," Mia said and lingered.

"You never told me, Mom," Sera said.

"Now, you're taking care of yourself, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes, I am. I'm learning a lot."

"What about your studies? I talked to Selma. We are both worried about you."

"I'm fine. I needed a break. Been running too much lately. How are you? You look tired."

Sera felt a change in Mia. Would they ever talk, go beyond the surface of things, down to the core. And in that case what was the core? Was there any? Anything to reach and grab hold of?

"They say it might have come back."

"Do they know for sure?"

It felt as if her voice was breaking into thousands of pieces, scattering into an infinite space, where speech didn't exist, only vibrations.

"They don't know yet. They're taking more tests. Sera, I have to sell the house."

"No!" a sudden anger rose in her, and she felt her fingers tense and her throat tighten.

She looked into her mother's eyes in the screen, electronic dots forming a picture transmission of her mother from the other side of the world. Sera listened to Mia's voice and saw her tears and felt that the world was falling apart, the world she knew from a long time ago. A precious image in her heart.

"I can't live in this big house. Besides it'll fall apart soon if nobody takes care of it. And I don't know what will happen in a year," Mia said, her voice weak and quiet.

Mia was surrendering to whatever was consuming her. Sera breathed silently watching herself, as if the image of her mother was a reflection of herself. And she gazed at her mother on the computer screen, as if Sera was outside of her body and mind, only spirit.

When Selma came in, Mia had already said goodbye. Mia wanted Sera to come home. Those were her final words. But how could she? Now that everything was changing, now that she was here, had come all this way? Could she continue all this by herself in a place, which would be foreign to her now?

Selma made them tea, but they didn't speak about Mia. There was nothing to say. They crossed their fingers as to close out all the vampires, which were trying to invade their space. It was about the present not a life in the past or future. She had to stay focused. She couldn't be in two places. Selma gave her a long hug, which felt real good. After a long time of stillness, Selma began playing with her long hair, and they spoke again. They talked about school, and what was waiting for them. Selma promised to help her get back on track. Whatever time there was had to do now. *Now*, Sera chanted inside as if it were a mantra. *Now, now.*

"I need to do stuff today, Selma, but I'll be back tonight with all of my things. I hope you haven't

made other plans with the room...?”

Selma shook her head and looked at her seriously.

“You haven’t told me anything, I wanna know what you have been up to...,” Selma said, her gaze wandered, then froze at Sera’s face, as if she was studying and searching it for answers.

Then Sera listened ever so carefully and heard a voice singing, without words. A humming. The voice had no sex, like a woman and a man joined in one vibration, as if the joy of God came through the voice.

“I’ll be happy...,” Selma finally said.

“You hear the humming?” Sera suddenly asked.

“What humming?” Selma looked a little bewildered for a second, then she disappeared into her own train of thoughts.

“You know, Sera, I really care about you, I am curious what you have been up to. It’s just that...well, and then I don't know,” Selma let her arms and hands out to the sides, resignedly.

“You see, it may not be that important right now,” Sera said.

“Stand clear of the closing doors,” the announcement echoed through the train.

Sera walked down the floor as the train went into motion. There were plenty of seats, not many people lived so far up on the west side. She traveled through the tunnels of the Underground, lost in staring at the darkness behind the windows. The darkness, in which Doru sought to find peace, the darkness she was running away from, yet also drawn to. The city of tunnels. She suddenly felt her blood rush.

Nothing has happened to me, I have felt no pain, no edges..., she thought and with a mixture of fear and glee wondered about what life would bring her. George said that all people had their struggles, their Karma which, if focused on as tests, part of a grand illusion, could be transcended. Most people still didn’t have a grasp of what lay beyond the lives they led, which to so many was still an incomprehensible reality; to others it played with their minds and hearts, stirring something within. Once people worked to let go of attachments and fears, which bound them to the world of illusions, an infinite and timeless level of being would emerge. She had asked him, if she would ever reach that highest of levels of being.

“If not in this lifetime, in the next,” he had answered with a smile.

She wanted to hear him say it was possible in this lifetime, she couldn't imagine having to wait until some other time outside of her own conception of this body and mind. He had nodded then.

“Everything’s possible,” he had said. “But the present moment is the most important thing to consider, through presence and focus, the past, the future and the present can be one. When time melts into one, the soul will become one with everything. That is what the great yogis call the state of Samadhi.”

More people climbed on board. She sensed the bodies getting closer to her, encircling her. One circle.

She looked at a man, who sat down next to her. Small dark, frizzy braids hung down his brown face and neck, dangling like little harebells. Sera caught his eyes and fell in love with their teasing glare; big, round open eyes that closed when a smile spread around the mouth and cheeks.

“Hi, my name is Joe,” he said and looked at the people around him, as if he was afraid they might be listening in.

“Hi,” Sera said and smiled, her eyes looking down shyly.

“They brought you here to give us a message,” Joe said with a low voice.

“Who?”

“Them,” he said and pointed up.

He was a little older than Sera, in his late twenties, but he didn’t seem older than sixteen. A childish kind of innocence radiated from him and it made her feel giddy. But below the childishness lay a seriousness, which only age and experience could bring. He looked up at the ceiling of the car.

“They keep us drugged so that we won’t kill ever again. They are still afraid of us. We can’t control ourselves. It comes through the air that they boost out. Think about it. Why is everybody sleeping?” he whispered, his pungent and warm breath close to hers.

Sera was silent, listening to him. He made her laugh within. His eyes came quite to life when he spoke, otherwise he looked like he was the one sleeping. He was a playful spirit, his face full of new expressions, which made it hard for her to take him seriously.

“The trains are less so.”

“Excuse me?” she asked.

“The air is better on the trains. That’s why I ride them. Less noise too, less voices...,” all of a sudden his voice was hoarse and muffled.

“So you spend your time here?”

He nodded surprised; then he looked content.

“You have come with a message.”

Sera smiled puzzled by the sincerity and directness of his hoarse voice. There was something ominous about him. If everything happened for a reason why was he here?

They were leaving another station and going into another tunnel, when suddenly the lights flickered for a few seconds. Then she heard a laughter, a deep, melodic voice not like the shrills of Joe’s voice. But the laughter came from Joe, another part of him. His face was the last thing she saw before the lights went out and left them in pitch dark. It was an unusual transition, but it didn’t frighten her.

“I knew it,” he chuckled.

He is mad, she thought.

A hand grabbed hers, and she was pulled up from her seat. Joe had stopped laughing, and now she recognized the noises of the rest of the people in the train.

“People remain calm. We’re having some technical problems,” a shrill loudspeaker voice announced. “Please don’t be alarmed and remain seated at all times, until we have this cleared.”

A sigh went through the crowd, like a gust, but there was still an uneasiness among people, she sensed. She felt her throat buzzing again. There were voices pressing on being set free in her body, but she kept them on a distance, so that only an image appeared in her mind.

<we follow the river, down and down, with the current, in its arms; its rocking make us sleepy like in our mother’s womb. we can only go one way. one way. down with the river. on and on ... we follow the river of our bones, we follow the footsteps of our soles along with the currents of time and space. we are the spirits who built the tracks we follow in our sleep, but do we remember? do we wonder whereto they go or whereto we made them lead us?>

“There is a train behind us. How can they stop that? Has everything stopped?” Joe’s voice whispered into her ear. She could taste his musty breath.

This is just a dream we are all dreaming, Sera thought and breathed air all the way into her stomach.

“The world can never stop, time will have to move and our poor atoms won’t stand the friction...,” he lingered, catching his breath, pushing her, making her walk.

She could feel people stirring around her. Panic could easily develop and crush every life into little pieces. Into poor atoms. The loudspeaker made another announcement that there was nothing to be alarmed over. Joe’s voice became deeper and more sonorous for every minute.

“Sweet, sweet creature, you can show us the light. You have it.”

Sera listened, beyond Joe’s voice, beyond the bodies of the trains, beyond her fears, beyond her dreams, into something which wasn’t even atoms. It was silent there. No voices. Was that the future? Would they all fall asleep? She closed her eyes, closed out the darkness, and behind her eyelids there was light, reflected in the blue of the sky, the green of the fields, the brightness of the sun. She breathed it into her being. She kept her mind on that, used all her energy on focusing, everything George and Doru had taught her with love and compassion. All that had brought her to this moment in her life. Somehow. A torn up face appeared. It was bloody. She saw the spirit leaving, like a gust of wind, a ripple in the water, a snowflake sinking, or the whiteness in the flame. It was free.... George wanted her help. His face was there. Then she saw her mother’s face. It was clearer than the previous images. But her voice was flickering like candlelight. Movement, nothing else. Then there was only darkness.

“Yes, you’ve got it!” Joe’s voice traveled through the air like an arrow, swishing.

Even before she opened her eyes, she felt it. It was brighter than the normal train light. He still held unto her hand, but now she led the way, to the end of the car. Behind her people were talking but nobody stood. They just sat there as if the train had never stopped, as if nothing had ever happened, only their

talking implied the novelty of the situation.

“This is my stop, Joe,” she said and let go of his hand, realizing that he held onto her of fear.

“But you’ll be back. You won’t let them crash. They can make it happen, you know. They will if they decide it,” his voice was like a child’s, vulnerable, and afraid of abandonment.

She sensed his fear and the tears stuck in his throat.

“Don’t worry,” she said surprising herself. “The light is here. They can’t struck down a seeing person. Be aware.”

She went through the side door and jumped off the small passage ledge, which connected the two cars onto the narrow ground between the wall and the rails. Looking back she saw the light still shining like a single beacon in the dark. Her hands were shaking as she followed the edge of the track walking along the sides of the train. On the other side people were waiting. She looked back again, afraid that Joe would be following her. He terrified her. All that fear and doomsday prophecy in his voice, as from another dimension.

o o

In my dream, I am in a circus. Cirque d’arc-en-ciel. All the artists are dressed in bright colored tight costumes. Powerful colors. So bright that it dazzles the eyes.

At first, it seems that there is no order to the crowd of circus performers in the great ring under the dome of the tent. But there is a sense to the chaos and I am part of it, dressed up like everybody else. We perform well, one person is whirling herself around a rope, another walking, jumping and dancing on a line, as if she can really walk on air. I am one of the clowns, a silent, pondering one. The clown, who makes the audience laugh the most is a man, who has a thousand different facial expressions. I can hear their laughter, but every time I look to the seats, I can’t see anybody. All I see is the wind tugging in the sawdust. A strong, warm wind like at home with my parents.

Then we are under the open sky, the light much brighter than the projectors of the ring. I hear a scream. Someone has fallen. It is the tightrope dancer. People swim around the woman. Then another falls, I sense it before it happens, and I’m right under the woman to catch her. I feel the weight of her in my arms for a long time.

The dream lay as a protective seal over her as she walked down the hallways and corridors of the Ustodians’ Headquarters. No matter what happened, she could only gain. *I’m following my heart*, she said to herself, wondering if that was merely another illusion of the world. Of course, everything was an illusion, but beyond lay a secret, magical power, if she knew how to detach herself.

It was lunch break and everybody had gone to the big canteen where everybody had lunch together at

12:30 pm, except from a few who had to remain to keep an eye on the office spaces. Soledad was one of them. Today was different though, she had left the copy room without anyone knowing.

She focused on the crown of her head. She drew the Divine energy from above through her from the top of her head, forming a halo of energy and light. *Lay a protection around me, sweet Goddess. Give me your powers, your arms, your strength,* she sang to herself, creating a veil around her, a veil of protection, a veil of power.

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

The elevator to the 12th floor and above was carefully guarded and supervised. She knew there was no way she could sneak in. Four Keepers were securing that the people who entered the Ustodians' private areas were authorized to do so and securely sent away thereafter. Soledad had no plan, only a wish. A wish so profound and heartfelt that she knew that she would have guidance no matter what happened. She let the veil shroud her, like a buzzing of energy, tiny small vibrations eager to heal, transform and bring life to dark and dormant places.

She smiled. A Keeper walked up to her, his eyes blue, sharp, wakeful. She caught his eyes and held them in hers. She passed some of the little vibrations into him, fed him, and breathed it into him. And before he could say anything, she spun another veil that could reach him and let all of her barriers down. *To reach someone else, I have to reach myself, let it all show,* she thought.

"I'm here to see Dr. Ferguson. I believe he wants to see me."

"And your name is?" the Keeper asked.

"Soledad Miguel."

Their eyes were still interlocked, and she thought of Matthew. She had not reached him yet, but she didn't want to force it on him. It had to be when he was ready. *I'm strong. Give me extra strength, Heavenly Mother,* she sang in her mind. She followed the Keeper to the desk as to stay in close contact with him. She imagined her breath to be the veil of illusion and power, she was spinning.

Lay a protection around us, sweet Goddess. Give me your powers, your arms, your strength. I will take him to the sea to watch the rolling of the waves. They open themselves at us like arms reaching out for us. Your strong arms, Goddess are everywhere; in the deep roots of the trees, in the rays of the sun, in the silver light of the moon, in the eyes of the newborn. Breathe, breathe, she sang.

Another Keeper was coming over to the desk. Soledad kept her gaze at the first Keeper with the blue eyes. He looked up occasionally, as he was leafing through a stack of papers, searching for her name.

Spinning, spinning the veil of dreams, searching for the veil of liberation, we are all the children of the

same Universe, I will bring you home, bring you joy, a joy you have within.

“Ms. Miguel I’m looking, but....”

“Keep looking, dear,” she replied.

There was no urgency in her voice, she held it softly, let it vibrate with her hands, her eyes, her whole body like a rare flower. The Keeper kept looking, his gaze more often returning to hers. The other Keeper was beginning to move restlessly, unable to see what the other was doing. His eyes were avoiding Soledad’s, and she knew that her spinning was working.

“Peter, forget about it. The regulations say that we can’t let them in if there isn’t any authorization,” the other said.

Instead of confusing Peter, it rather had the opposite effect.

“There is no harm done in contacting the Ustodians. It’s Dr. Ferguson, he won’t mind....” Peter said.

He caught her gaze again and smiled this time. Two dimples showed in his face and she smiled too. Her guards were down, she felt his joy, his warmth, his strength.

“In a minute, we’ll have this straightened out, Miss.”

She nodded. He spoke into a small screen.

“Soledad Miguel is here to see you Sir. May I send her up?”

She couldn’t hear or see what the reply was but not so long thereafter Peter, the Keeper walked over to her and followed her to the blue elevator, with the other Keeper’s sulky eyes following him. They waited for the elevator, standing next to each other. He walked with her into the elevator and used a special key to authorize the elevator.

"You are going to the 12th floor, someone will receive you up there," he said and smiled to her. He couldn't go with her. It seemed almost like he didn't want to let her go, his body reaching out for her, his mind still resisting. There was sadness in his eyes, she thought. The only feeling she had had since she started spinning. Her mind had been blank, quiet, just going with the stream of life.

On the 12th floor, when she stepped out of the elevator and walked into a deep green corridor, she sang again in her mind. *Goddess, your strong arms are everywhere; in the deep roots of the trees, in the rays of the sun, in the silver light of the moon, in the eyes of the newborn,* she sang while she held the image of Matthew, Sera, George and Doru to calm her mind and her heartbeat. She was still spinning and spinning, her body one vibrating wheel. She walked carefully, entering this unknown world. It was like walking into a jungle, everything was a variation of green, the painted walls, the Arabian rugs, the linen-covered chairs, except from the dark and solid Mahogany baseboards, doors and small tables. She looked with wonder. These were materials she rarely saw used anywhere in the Underground.

I love you. I am part of you, let me into your arms. I will be your messenger, Heavenly Mother! she sang in her mind.

On the door it read 'Dr. Peter Ferguson' on a shiny golden sign. She waited a few minutes before she

ventured to knock. *They live here like normal people*, she thought. *Normal, privileged people*. Nobody answered so she knocked again, a little harder. Relieved that she didn't have to deal with Peter yet, she noticed the quietness in the hallway like an abandoned house. Had she misunderstood the directions the Keeper had given her, or had she walked into a parallel reality? There was no one here to meet her, but then again she had a feeling he hadn't spoken to Peter either. With all the strange powers she felt today, nothing could surprise her.

She started to walk further down the hallway, reading the few golden name signs she saw. She turned a lot to the left and then to the right, not knowing where she was going, it felt like walking in circles. Was there an end to the corridors? Was it designed to let her feel lost when really there was only one way? She had walked into a mystery. She expected another truth would reveal itself here, another layer of reality would unfold. All the stories she had been told about the Ustodians would soon be challenged. Behind one of these doors Matthew would be, if not him personally then at least the answer to his whereabouts. She tried to breathe calmly, and feel her way rather than thinking it.

She walked through another door into another corridor. They said it used to be the main seat of the greatest spiritual peace organization. But when death and destruction pushed for its presence the best of intentions couldn't prevent it from coming. The peace people could only watch how the militaries of the world destroyed land and millions of people in a matter of hours. When the Final War had left New York City in devastation, the tall, roomy building had turned into a hospital. They had fixed it up a lot since then, but the sense of the sick and dying being transported through long, bare corridors from one room to another couldn't escape the place. She could feel it in her heart. There had been much grief of the body, and distrust in its abilities to heal and love itself, to become whole, and to be part of the greater reality beyond the limitations of the body.

At the end of one corridor, she saw a door being opened. A faint light fell on the carpet. Then she heard voices, so distant that they sounded like a different tongue. A woman, tall, her skin black and smooth came out of the door first. The woman spotted Soledad instantly.

"Hey, how did you get in here? There's a woman out here in the hallway!" the woman said and turned her face back toward the door opening.

Soledad began to sing her song again. *Lay a protection around me, Goddess. Give me your power, your arms, your strength*. She walked further up with racy steps.

"Excuse me, I'm here to see Dr. Ferguson. I believe he wishes to see me," she spoke out loud.

A man, she recognized from the party, his black crew cut hair and big shiny glasses resting on a long, slim nose, came out of the door, and looked at Soledad as if examining a prize animal. She tried to catch his eyes, but his gaze wandered all over her.

"Do you know this woman, Peter?" the black woman asked through the door, afraid of taking off her eyes of Soledad.

“No citizens are allowed on these premises! How did you get in?” the man with the large glasses said.

“I work here, Mr.!” she answered and saw Peter’s face appear in the door opening. *These are stubborn, willful people*, she thought. *So little I can do to calm them down.*

“Dr. Ferguson, I’m here to talk to you. The Keeper downstairs let me in. He spoke to you, I believe.”

She stood in front of the three people, open, welcoming them with her soul, while she realized she was at the heart of the bear’s cave. These were the Ustodians, a small group of ordinary looking people. Their faces were curious like children’s, their bodies holding back indecisively. She had learned from her colleagues that there were six of them. Two doctors, a politician, a psychologist, an engineer, and an ex-officer of the army. She had disturbed their equilibrium, their game. Her eyes met Peter’s who looked baffled, uncomfortable. She felt their eyes, there were more behind the open door. Inside the room, she recognized daylight, it was soft and yellow like at Doru’s place, and something outside sharpened the light. It had to be water. The river.

She started spinning her veil within again. This time it took more force of will from her. *Spinning, spinning the veil of dreams, searching for the veil of liberation, our true names, we are all the children of the same Universe, connected, working toward the light, give us the strength and imagination. Give us your arms, your powers to see clearly.*

She smiled. Then he smiled. And finally he spoke too.

“I almost forgot,” he said as if he had just remembered.

“Let’s go to one of the smaller meeting rooms. You should have waited for me downstairs. We don’t want people up here.”

When Peter said this, she felt the hostility wane, as if her calm breathing had become theirs and vice versa. One. She wanted to give them more, more of her being, let them feel the reality of being free, a spiritual lightness from the heart, but Peter started walking down the hallway, leading her back the way she had come. He walked all the way back to his apartment door without a word. When he had closed his door, he looked at her again. There was no hallway, and they stepped right into a huge room, where red brown walls rose like a deep forest, and endless floor space covered with carpets and rugs softened the sounds like grass and leaves. On dark wooden shelves and tables, pieces of artwork and books spread in abundance like weeds. Matthew’s place barely had anything on his few pieces of furniture, a framed picture here and there, a few books, a magazine, and his CD’s.

“Don’t you ever do that again! Or next time I won’t be so kind!” Peter was trying to reproach her for it, but she had more important things to do. There was no time for it.

“Mr. Ferguson, I didn’t come here to be reprimanded by you or to hurt your feelings. I can’t sit around and wait for you to come to me. You asked for my help.”

Her voice was as firm as she could make it. She breathed deeply, which calmed her senses.

“How is Matthew?”

He looked sharply at her, studying her. He was afraid of her, she realized.

“What I said the other night is strictly confidential,” he said not looking at her. “Can I get you a drink?”

“No, thanks.”

“Well, I will have one.”

He walked into another room by the end of the living area. She could hear him rummaging, opening cupboards and pouring something into a glass. She sat down on the floor crossed her legs and closed her eyes. She could feel the wheel of being much stronger there on the floor, where she could focus more easily. She relaxed more and more, the deeper she went back into her meditation.

Peter returned to the big living room, slowly and gently. She felt his presence like a shadow filling the room. *We are all children of God, we all know the light deep within.* When she opened her eyes, he was standing two feet away from her. By sudden impulse, she reached out her arms in a warm smile. *Come Peter and feel the joy of life, its mysterious powers, its subtle vibrations of growth, of light,* she thought.

“I know what you do. I knew before Matthew met you. We know about you people...,” he stopped and smiled. He stood tall and proud.

Soledad fell silent but stood up. There was another side to him, which he hadn't shown her that night at the party. Her arms were still outstretched as if in prayer, full of energy. An energy that could force him off his feet if she threw it at him, but she wasn't here to fight. He had been scared enough by the new situation.

“I came to see how Matthew is doing. I am worried about him. If I can't see him, will you give him...,” she said and was interrupted.

The force of his words made her pull her arms to her. She knew she had to resist. She had to show determination.

“I know you people, you, you think you serve a threat to what we have created here, but we are watching you. This, this world is perfect. We selected all the best of every culture in the world and created a perfect world. But you people wouldn't understand that. You are ignorant in your search for eternal life,” he still grinned, contemptuously like Matthew did, when he felt cornered.

“But Matthew is dying,” Soledad said and started walking toward him.

He wasn't looking at her eyes, and it was hard for her to make a connection. But taking one tiny step at a time made her stronger, more focused again. She was forcing him to let go of his grip of energy.

“I'm not here to fight you. I want to see Matthew. He is sick and naturally, I want to help him just like you do. It's horrible to be left in the dark, not knowing, not getting a chance to participate in the course your life is taking.”

Like tongues of fire licking her, his energy kept feeding on her energy, her air and light. She chanted the words like the ones she span within. She had to win this battle, go through the forest of fire even if

she'd get burned. Fire couldn't fight fire. She had to be like the water, fluid, penetrative. Water would put out flames and heal the burns. But how could she become water? She knew how to fly, how to lie still like a seed, but couldn't yet move like water with certainty.

She ceased to walk, silent in front of him, and caught his eyes there while she focused on the movement of cooling, cleansing energy of water.

"You're a very beautiful woman, Soledad. What are you doing here among people who never use their power constructively? It's perfect, this world we've created. We have created this world. There is so much to draw from it and so little harm to cause."

He had changed his tactics. She didn't know if it had anything to do with his eyes, looking straight at her now, or the energy of water that flowed from her stomach.

"I see a great potential in you. I came to see you for that reason. I sent Matthew to you for that reason. We know everything. Remember, we are the eyes of the world."

She felt anger and despair rising in her, she wanted to shout at him, tell him how wrong he was, how lonely and pathetic he was. He had no one close to him, not even God, the beat of life pulsating through him. But she was here to heal and explore. She let go of the anger and helplessness. The Goddess was guiding her, She was with her. And she knew that he was bluffing.

"We all have a potential to become the greatest."

"No some of us more so than others."

Soledad was getting impatient. She didn't have time to discuss philosophies.

"We're here to help each other reach that highest state," she said silently and took his hand.

At first, he resisted ever so slightly. Then as if he gave up a long battle, he slipped out of his shell and gave into her touch. His hand was cold and dry. She had somehow expected a hot one.

"Take me to Matthew, please," she whispered, drawing all her powers into the words.

She realized then that the struggle with Peter had only to do with the surface. She had come to learn about the Ustodians, know their weaknesses and strengths. The fruits were ripening. Peter was wrong about them, there were things the Ustodians didn't know, if they had known, they would have joined them to gain access to the same powers. The thought made her shiver within. Powers like that placed in the wrong hands were explosive, mass destructive. History told tales of great leaders that had turned inconceivably evil, driven by forces greater than themselves like the mystical powers, and they had brought imbalance in the very elements of the world, in Cosmos. Did the Ustodians serve that kind of threat?

Peter stood for a long time looking, as if a whole lifetime was passing by in the iris of her eyes. Then he went to the door, her hand and body following him. *Can I really break my way through?* she asked herself.

They walked down the hallway, back toward the elevator. Nobody passed them on the way, and the relief gave Soledad a new boost of confidence. Still quiet, eyes wide open, Peter stood next to her waiting

for the elevator with a blurry gaze at the world. Peter used the same kind of key as the Keeper had. They went one floor up and came into another long corridor similar to the 12th floor, however, less decorated and with plain white walls. He let go of her hand. Afraid that the spell might be broken now, she whispered softly to Peter.

“Where are we going?”

“To Matthew,” he answered bluntly.

Goddess let it be true, she sang to herself. There will be rebirth soon, you have lain barren for so long. Maybe the Kali age will soon come to an end.

They walked for some time in circles, in and out of different corridors. They passed by people dressed in long thin coats, the kind she had seen Med people wear, beige with a red flower on their right chest pocket. She had been to the clinic a few times for shots, detesting it every time. Since she started doing yoga intensively, her body kept its balance in every way, and she rarely had to worry too much about her diet or her immune system.

Nobody took much notice of the two. Everybody seemed to know Peter here. This was where he worked, researching to find a cure for Matthew and others.

“He’s very sick,” Peter finally said. “We don’t know what it is, let alone how to cure it.”

They stopped in front of a door. On a small replaceable nametag on the door, it read ‘Dr. Paul Kennedy’. Peter hesitated and then after a while he opened the door. Soledad entered the room first. Matthew was lying quietly on a hospital bed. They had put a form of respirator to his mouth, which he breathed through slowly. His eyes were closed and his skin pale and dry. He looked like a breathing corpse. An old man dying. The fire in him had turned into small embers.

“Is he in a coma?” she exclaimed frightened, as Peter came up to her after having shut the door quietly.

“No, it’s only helping him to breathe when his oxygen intake has reached the lowest.”

Soledad walked over to Matthew and touched his hand. She was still connected to Peter and could sense his love, his helplessness. She couldn’t feel Matthew, only the slight vibrations emanating from his warm hand. *I must talk to George*, she thought. She focused in on his energy fields to try to read the problem. She had never been a great healer, not like Doru. He had replied to this that what was true to her would grow in her. She wanted to reach down and touch Matthew, smell the wondrous scent of him. Then she felt a warmth coming from him, which puzzled her. Did he feel her presence? *Goddess, help me find the means to help him! Show him mercy and love!*

She felt a hand on her shoulder. Peter’s face was firm, but she knew it was only the surface.

“He’ll get much better if you bring him to the Grounds,” Soledad said and didn’t move her gaze from Peter.

Peter shook his head.

"We've closed that world off. This is much better. We're safe here. People prefer this. Look what happened twenty one years ago," Peter said and raised his hands.

"Well, not safe enough, Dr. Ferguson," Soledad replied and pointed at Matthew.

"You can't help him, can you!" Peter said and walked away from the bed.

"Yes, I can, but I can't do magic. Healing is a process of the mind and soul, of the ill stricken."

"I always knew it. You religious people created wars and strife by promising the world miracles. All lies and illusions to turn people into fanatic, dependent lunatics."

Soledad fell silent. There was no use. Peter was absorbed by his preservation instincts and fears. But she was content, she knew now that Matthew could be healed. It was a strong feeling in her and the father had only reinforced it.

XVIII

"It's a good day to die," Sera mumbled to herself in the dark corridors.

It was as if some higher force was leading her, guiding her away from the trains, through the mazes of Underground passages, up and down, back and forth to her destination, which she only now had a recollection of. *Today is a strange day*, she thought. *The train, the man, the light, Soledad...* She didn't know why Soledad suddenly appeared in her thoughts. Was she in any trouble? Sera suddenly remembered that Soledad had gone to the Ustodians today.

She began to recognize the walls, the grounds, and the way the ceilings hang low and soon the big black door appeared further down. Did it matter where she had come from, which path she'd taken? Would she still have ended up here? It felt like all roads led her to the same place.

"Hi," Hans said from up the stairs, as she opened the door.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

Hans nodded reluctantly.

"Have you got all the torches and the food?"

"Yep!"

"Is Soledad here yet?"

Hans shook his head.

When Soledad finally appeared, Sera's anxieties about the assignment had long time passed. Sera was trying to figure out what to do with their plan, how to make it more practical. What would be wise to do if the Keepers arrested them even before they reached a public place, where people couldn't help but see, feel and wonder?

"We can only pray that the Universe will protect us," Soledad answered, and gave Sera a long glance.

Soledad wanted to stay within this feeling of love; her love for Matthew and Sera softened into a light in her chest.

“Did you see Peter?” Sera asked.

“Yes, he took me to Matthew. He is not well, but according to Peter he is no longer in a critical state.”

“How did you do it?” Sera asked with curiosity.

“I’m not sure. I opened my heart and my wishes to them. It was like I felt my way to get in touch and connect like when you listen, I imagine. It’s like spinning a wheel with the tips of your fingers. The higher powers are with me today.”

Sera nodded.

“I know it’s eerie.”

“I have to have George look at him, maybe there are herbs, which can help him or maybe it’s just a matter of moving him away from this place.”

Mia, Sera thought and remembered the pain.

“Can George really help my mother?” Sera asked softly, afraid that by talking about her, her mother’s illness would become real, life threatening. So far away from her home, the dream of her Aotearoa had taken root inside of her, but wasn’t yet living in the present moment.

Soledad looked at her tenderly as if she was feeling her way into her, knowing the past and the future.

“Yes, I think, he can most likely help her. Go speak to him when you get a chance.”

The common room filled with people rapidly. Sera sensed confusion and excitement. She preferred the room under normal circumstances, the homely peace and quiet. This energy easily brought her out of her calm state. She wished for a moment she could stay there, sheltered and warm, like she used to as a kid in their house in Titirangi. She wished she didn’t have to go, that she didn’t have to risk falling, and jeopardize all of what these good people at the center had created. It could vanish as rapidly as the mirages, she would see as a child; grand castles in the dry beach sand above the ocean and below the sky. Tomorrow might turn out very differently from their dreams and hopes. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to know what that was.

Soledad stood up, radiant and tall, like a Goddess. She spoke softly but clearly enough for everybody to hear. For an instant, Sera felt very proud. She had been blessed with the presence of people, who meant something, not only to her, but also to many others.

“Sera, Hans and I will go to the Mole people as planned. We need you to stay together, until we find out what the turnout will be. I feel that the strength and protection of the Goddess is with us today. Things might take shape sooner than we think. We have to be prepared to seize the moment when it arises, so keep your senses open!”

The small crowd in the room listened.

“One of the Ustodians has listened to us,” Soledad added as an afterthought. “I think the fruits of our work are not so far ahead anymore.”

Then they were on their way with the blessings of George and the others, heading toward the quarters of the Mole people, toward the lightless home of Charlie and Benjamin. Hans led the way. They took the train despite the many curious eyes and remarks that Hans got here and there on their way. They were running the risk of Hans being caught, but they had no choice, because there were no straight pathway systems going that far north. Luckily everything seemed to flow with them, not against them. Like Soledad had said, it was a day full of guidance.

When they arrived at the Grand Central Station, rush hours had set in and the Underground was a fiercely heaving ocean of people. They pushed their way through, Hans still leading them. He quickly led them away from the crowds and into passages running along the main street tunnels. Then they started to descend. There weren't any stairs, but Sera could feel that they were going deeper into the earth, as a certain pressure built up in the depths of her ears. She imagined how Doru so easily would turn it into a journey of the spirit rather than of the ego and fears. It felt like she had crawled so often through this darkness, of the soil, not of the sky, and yet it still crept in under her skin and nails, filling her pores with a light pressure, tapping her lungs of oxygen. When there were no more bulbs to cast light on their path, they took out their torches. The beams of light hit the walls and grounds like solid poles on a black canvas. Sera watched Soledad and Hans in the fluttering torchlight and reached out for Soledad's hand.

"Let's stay close," she whispered into the darkness and a hand reached her and then another, a smaller one.

They walked like that in silence for a long time and not much changed, the dark walls and invisible grounds seemed to be taking them into their strange tentacle-like arms.

"How can you find your way in here?" Sera had had the question on her lips since they entered the darkness, but she didn't want to be the impatient one.

She had to ask now. The voices were coming back, muffled voices only protected by thin glass walls. Speaking usually made her physical presence more prominent, but this time it was to no avail....

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It seemed that the fragmented voices came from the dark, seeping through into her, as if the darkness had a core or a depth, which would absorb her. Wherever the light from the torches hit, she thought she saw glimpses of people, the embodiments of the voices, long time forgotten, slipping past them from another time or space. She was sleep walking, dreaming her way in life and in darkness. She was walking through a world of dreams. They were the dreams of the people living above them and like a liquid they seeped through the layers of soil, drawn by gravity and the coolness of the dark. Dreams were shaped in the element of darkness and brought into light to merge with everything.

Hans answered her by stopping. They all fell silent instinctively. They stood at a crossroad.

“Your friends live that way, I can’t go with you that far. I’ll go this way,” he said, his voice shivering, and pointed with his torch.

“I’ll meet you later, your friends can show you the way back.”

“But Hans!” Sera whispered, afraid to wake the dark. But his hand was gone and they watched the pole of light disappear down the corridor.

Soledad was silent, still holding her hand.

“What now?” Sera asked with tears stuck in her throat.

“We will see where it takes us. I think we’re okay.”

Was it doubt Sera could trace in Soledad’s voice? Or was it somebody else’s voice? Then she heard it. A sound of somebody sniffing. Sera started walking toward the sound. *I’ll show them. The whole world. My courage, my faith. Om, Shantih, Shantih*, she said to herself.

The snuffle came closer, and soon it stood in front of them, a big, brown hairy thing. Its fur was so

dirty that it fell in long threads like dread locks. Sera almost laughed from relief, when she realized it was only a dog. She hadn't seen one for so long. Sera walked to it. It occurred to her that this was the true keeper of this world, and if she couldn't make contact with him, Charlie and Benjamin's dog, they would never be able to carry through with their plan.

Soledad had stepped back, letting go of Sera's hand. Sera looked back at her in the dark. She had never had a dog and knew very little about them. But it struck her that it hadn't barked and took it as a good sign. She tried to send out a thought of friendliness. She took one step toward the dog. It was panting, but still didn't move as if listening to the core of her. She took another step. She sensed its gaze heavy on her body. She walked on slowly until she stood next to it. *She closed her eyes and prayed for the first time in her life. Dear God, let me through this gate so that we can free the light trapped here.*

"Casa," the voice of Benjamin suddenly echoed through the walls. "What are you doing here? You're so quiet friend."

His voice sounded sad as if the dog had passed away, and he was speaking to its spirit.

"Benjamin," Sera cried out. "He is over here. It's Sera."

Sera flashed the torch toward the sound of his voice.

"Sera!" Benjamin said with joy.

When he came over to her, he gave her a big, smelly hug. Casa began to bark lightly, and Sera could feel its tail like a pendulum moving from side to side.

"She likes you," Benjamin said.

"Meet my friend, Soledad," Sera said, and she searched the space with the torch, until she found the other woman.

"Where is Charlie? We need to speak to you."

"Sera, he isn't well. It went all right for a little while and then...well he is sleeping now, I think. I never know where he goes. Will they take him away from me?"

"I don't know."

Benjamin felt silent.

"But let's see if our news won't cheer you up."

Benjamin led them down the corridor, which ended suddenly and to each side there were two notches, which framed two miniature cubicles each consisting of a mattress and a few belongings. At the end wall the remains of a small fire settled. A stench of urine and dead cadavers filled the small space. To Sera's surprise, it didn't bother her. There were too many other things occupying her senses and mind. They had passed this gate.

Charlie smiled in his sleep like a baby sucking on its thumb contentedly, remembering being curled up in its mother's womb. He quickly awoke from his slumber as Soledad, Sera and Benjamin settled down next to his mattress.

"You're waking me up, Benji. I told you to stay away."

It's quiet here, Sera thought. No voices. The silence surrounded them like a heavy cloak, not even the faint sounds of trains vibrated through the air. They had come to a place beyond the speed of sound, beyond light, and the guarded boundaries of the city.

"Charlie, it's happening, we need your help," she said to the dying man. *I need you to be alive. I need you to walk.*

He spoke to her in a mellow, soft voice. It wasn't a voice she had heard him use before. It seeped through her skin and eyes, and buzzed around her head. She felt she knew that voice from somewhere, somewhere deep within, where the truth was hidden in darkness and disguised by dreams. Could that place ever be reached? Could what seemed the darkest of places be of the light?

What's the point of walking when joy is here? The light is right here...

"But Charlie, we can't all see that yet," Sera said out loud interrupting Charlie's thoughts.

"What's up?" Benjamin asked, his hands were lying uneasily in his lap.

"We've made contact with the Ustodians, and we want to make a march, a demonstration. We think, it's time to inform the citizens of this city of the world that lies above us. We need your help, your presence. The more people we are, the better. We all have a lot to gain from this," Sera said hopefully.

"You hungry?" Soledad asked.

Her voice sounded wrong in the dark, out of place without her mild face.

"We brought some food for you."

"Sounds great!" Benjamin said.

"They are trying to buy us, Benji," Charlie interrupted.

"Who are you talking about now, Charlie? What's got into you. This is Sera and her friend. You remember Sera!"

Charlie went silent for a long time. In the mean time, Benjamin started to eat. They could hear him chewing on some of the bread, nuts and vegetables, Soledad gave him. Casa had laid down like a custodian between the two women, where she silently and contentedly enjoyed the warm caresses of their hands. For a moment, it felt safe having gone so far under the surface of the world.

<in the ruins of a land deaden and destroyed by a civilization, life has not been ruined, only the lives of those who were already dead, who knew not the sacredness of their own being. what anger had not controlled the hands of those whose land had been destroyed by the weapons of death, when they carried the instruments to more destruction? did they for a moment glimpse the sacredness of what they had lost?>

Sera closed her eyes in the dark. Had it ever been day here? She fell into a spontaneous meditation,

moving through landscapes of colors and light, faster and faster until it felt like flying. A different reality, another part of being. Life was everywhere, the mere wheel of its existence suggested a never-ending cycle. When would it stop then? When would it begin? She opened her eyes and could still see the colors and the light. She knew what it was, he had been talking about. There it was between the endless walls of fiery darkness.

“There is life there, Charlie. The voices are calling for us, but we cannot abandon the responsibility we have in this body. You understand that, don't you?”

Then they were walking again, leaving the two cubicles behind. Soledad's hand lay warm and comforting in hers. Next to them, they could hear the heavy breathing of Benjamin and Charlie, and the little tapping of Casa's feet on the concrete ground.

It was then, she thought of Hans again. He had lived at the edge of this world not so long ago. He had journeyed to the Underground city, a stranger to everything like she had been when she came to the city. How did it feel to return from a journey like that? Would anything ever look the same? She wondered how it would feel to return to Auckland after all this. She would have more tales to tell than could ever be heard by people that only knew her as the woman she used to be. The girl who had gone fishing with her father once before he died. The girl who had lived with her mother in a small house most of her life, and invited her friends for tea parties. The girl who always got A's in school. The girl who had chased butterflies and flowers in colors and shapes that didn't exist. The girl who had imagined she could learn to fly like the birds, if only she studied them closely enough and learned their secret. The stories she could tell now went beyond that girl, into a realm of not only imagination, but also intuition and ancient wisdom. But hadn't the little girl come into life again now, more so than ever?

They walked slowly toward the spot where Hans had left them. Casa started to bark, and her voice echoing through transformed into a roar by the low ceilings and crooked walls.

“We have to see the rest of the people,” Sera whispered. “Can you take us there?” she asked Charlie and Benjamin.

“Of course,” Benjamin said. “I'm not so sure they will listen to us...we've always kept to ourselves, you know.”

Casa barked now and again as if she was seeking attention, making sure they knew she was there in the dark with them. Sera bent down and found her thick, dirty fur.

“Don't be afraid,” she whispered and petted her face and back.

“Soledad?” Sera cried out.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, my love,” Soledad answered.

Her soft voice was too soft for the roughness of the dark that kept embracing them, penetrating every

cell of them. Where did she find that tenderness?

They saw the light first. From afar. It crept through the corridors, cut through corners. Then they heard the voices, like a blessing of another world, like water for the burning. As they came closer, the aggression and violence of the voices slowed them down. They had not discussed tactics. Everything just happened with the protection of the higher powers. Would they still be guided by those omnipotent hands or led into a fire too strong and dangerous to control?

They spoke to each other slowly, gently. All four of them were alert now, stirred by the realness, the pressure of the outside. Even Casa remained still. Soledad spoke first.

"We must stay non-aggressive at all times. Every being is important. Every being is light."

Charlie spoke for the first time in a while.

"Silence is the most powerful tool. It's the tool of nature, of God."

Sera felt a shiver running through her body. She had heard many voices, outside and inside. She had never heard the voice of God or Goddess. Was that the reason? In the silence, truth and knowledge, perhaps even love was to be found, or it simply revealed itself, unfolded like a precious flower.

"Let a few of us speak, if need be, but we will march in silence, with open hearts and focus on God's light," Sera whispered, speaking of the future or some faraway past from some memory that surfaced as she opened her mind.

Her fingertips rustled like thin, withering leaves in the fall sun. From the sparkles they produced she imagined they could bring light on their path.

And so they walked again toward the place where the voices arose from, distant yet so close, like the beat of their heart. They would have to spin an immense web for all of them to be joined.

They stepped into a large alcove with walls that wept and drooped. There were notches, which formed natural resting places, and storage of whatever few belongings that could be kept in the darkness; perhaps a long burned out torch, candles, paper, stored food, a rug, mattress or blanket, clothing and rags. In the center of the alcove a small fire was burning, lighting up most of the place, almost reaching the furthest walls and corners.

A small crowd of people had gathered around Hans near the fire. It wasn't until she saw Hans that she spotted how big a crowd it was. There were as many children and young people among them as old people. An ancient people they looked. Their faces were dark, and it was unclear whether the soot and dirt of the darkness had colored their skin or they had been given that skin a long time ago to be protected by the strong, dry rays of the sun.

Sera felt a deep sadness in her chest; behind the soot of their faces, she heard voices that seemed so familiar to her, like the ones she heard in her dreams, where she walked on pilgrimages with her grandmother, or the voices that overwhelmed her in her waking hours.

Soledad and Sera walked up to the crowd, while Charlie, Benjamin, and Casa stayed a few feet away.

"Sera and Soledad!" Hans cried out as he saw her face.

He gave them both a long, silent hug. Sera could feel his body tremble. The damp dark reached into the bare bones.

"This is Sera and Soledad from above. They looked out for me," he said to a tall woman standing next to him.

The woman had long, black hair and eyes that squinted, hiding an intense color of green and blue that merged like spirals. She didn't have much softness in her face, only hard, straight lines, and bony skin. She had a body of poor constitution although she raised herself strongly.

"This is Nanda, my mother, the mole people's mother," Hans said, but didn't show any emotion.

"And you have come here to see us, bringing those cursed messengers that speak in strange tongues!" Nanda spoke loudly, looking toward the place where Benjamin and Charlie were still standing, waiting.

"We don't want anything to do with them. They scare us people. They are mean people."

She scanned Sera and Soledad.

"Where are they from, not the city of above?"

Hans shook his head.

"Son, tell me again, what all this is for? Why did you never leave a word of goodbye, and why have you returned?"

Hans looked down, staring at the ground for a long time.

"I followed a dream, a dream of the light," he said softly.

"Ah," the great woman said and sighed.

"A dream, I believe many of us have had," said Charlie appearing within the circle.

Some of the people crowding around the fire started back, surprised by Charlie's sudden materialization. He spoke with the voice that Sera had heard in her mind. It wasn't frightening, almost like a lullaby.

"I still don't understand why you people still reject us. We may have strange gifts that you don't understand, but let there be peace for today. I'm a dying man with too many dreams of light following me. I have no interest in this world anymore. So leave it be. Follow this boy and his dream, I think you might find he is bringing gifts for everybody."

Charlie became silent and left the circle again before anybody could protest or take hold of him. Benjamin and Casa were waiting for him at the entrance to the alcove.

After a while, the crowd started murmuring. Sera had up until then focused all of her attention on the woman standing next to Hans, with one hand resting on his shoulder. Now, Sera ventured to look closer at the faces surrounding them. They were mainly small faces, with eyes that opened very little, like the woman's. Their eyes, small white dots in the slim light from the fire, scanned the spaces nervously

while always sheltered by a nearby grown-up. It was hard to tell if it was a condition of their eyes, or the light from the fire that irritated them. Most of them were all bones, bending and leaning bodies like branches reaching for the grounds, protective of their most vital body parts. They wore long capes and pieces of fabrics wrapped around them, which hid their thin bodies. Some raised themselves beautifully like Nanda, and those were the ones she felt humbled by the most; they were the dreamers, the carriers, and the foundation of this people.

The murmurs stopped suddenly as Nanda rose her arms and moved them outstretched down again. Everybody sat down forming a circle around the fire. Soledad and Sera followed the crowd silently.

"We have waited a long time for a new day. My boy has met two women. He tells me they are of great importance to us. Are they messengers of more than dreams? We have plenty of dreams in our world; we carry the weight of many worlds above us. But our fathers and mothers chose the dark for a reason. We will not be fooled by any lies!"

The crowd nodded and made sounds of agreement.

"Speak and we will listen." Nanda's voice was sharp and her eyes sparkled for a moment in the light from the fire.

Sera and Soledad looked at each other. They listened to one another silently, and Sera spoke first.

"We don't come to tell lies or bring more dreams. We have come to tell you that the land we so mistreated decades ago wants us back. All of us. The sky is growing bluer and the plants growing stronger. The land is healing. Very few people in the Underground City know this. The Ustodians have kept it a secret for a long time. We can change this by uniting," Sera's voice was almost as strong as Nanda's, and she saw the faces responding to it.

"We need your help," Soledad spoke after a moment of silence. There was no urgency or desperation about her plead.

"Let us be the silent ghosts of the past. Let's show them what could be waiting for us beyond these corridors. Let's walk in peace toward the Grounds," Soledad said, rising from her seated position.

"I have seen the light in my dreams too. I have heard the voices of the past calling me. I ran away a long time ago, but I couldn't live up there among those people. They almost took me away to one of them places they keep people locked up in and what is worse," a large woman with thick, black hair said and pointed upwards. "So I hear you, I had a feeling about these things. I am not alone, I think?"

People around her nodded and smiled. Small, serious smiles.

"But how do you know that they won't kill us before we get there? Who says it is worth the fight then?" the voice of an elderly man in the crowd said.

It was hard to know whether he meant the Keepers, the Ustodians or simply the people of the Underground.

"We don't know if they won't kill us, unfortunately. There is no certainty in life. Now is as good as

ever and I think it is worth the chance. Can we keep living in fear or suppression of them, tell me? If we are willing to run a risk, things might be different," Soledad said and glowed.

She had a force, which sprang from such strange depths, Sera thought. All the elements were combined in that body that it radiated with love and determination.

"Just pay attention for a moment or two, and listen to your hearts. What do they tell you? Review those dreams of yours, and tell me what they bring you. Dreams carry spiritual meaning too. They aren't mere wishful thinking. They can guide us, show us what we forget to see," Soledad spoke as softly as possible, without demanding or losing her stature before these people.

Nobody spoke for a long while. Even Nanda kept silent, contemplating on the questions and the proposals given. Sera closed her eyes and felt the dark surrounding her within like a cloak. After a while, just before she opened her eyes to direct her attention to Soledad again, she saw a flicker of a light, barely enough to make sense. She knew now as ever that life was wondrous in that way.

"Listen to them brothers and sisters!" Hans got up in front, next to Soledad and Sera. "I have lived with them for a while, we can trust them. They have the dreams too."

"We can help each other!" Soledad said.

The faces stirred around them, with a bewildered look like puppets.

"With you we can form a large crowd, and with a big crowd we can bring people together, give them renewed courage, energy and faith. The loudspeakers will drown any speeches, and the Ustodians will stop us if we go to them directly. But we can walk as a group, walk the streets of the Underground, spreading our presence quietly. And if anyone wants to join us, they can. What will they do to a peaceful group of people?" Soledad added.

Sera watched the faces, she could see in the scarce light. Something was happening. It was as if all the spirits of the Underground gathered around them, transforming them into one thought, one hope, a messenger of the higher powers. Soledad's voice was no longer her own, it was everybody's, as familiar as the wind and all the mothers of the world.