

Part 7

The true path is through the sky and so has no landmarks and no description. All described paths are but tracing on the earth the shadow of one who has gone in the sky... it is a difficult, a heartbreaking path. None can tread it to the end who does not want it more than he wants any other thing.

Krishna Prem

XIX

In the breaking dawn, I see all the colors that we are made of, the energy fields that surround us and are in us; red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet that all turn into a brilliant white light. I can't tell if I am in my body or outside of it, but I know it is still there. I am stringed to it. Through it, I can touch and taste the world. Through it, I can hear and feel its many vibrations. Through it, I can see beyond and before this moment. The world is so much more than I could ever dream myself into, or imagine in my wakeful, dazed hours. Perhaps the only times, I have visited that vantage point and admired the world with a deep longing to return, are when I am in that deep state of sleep, where it appears I feel nothing.

All the small rooms of the school had been crowded with the strange, moldy smells of their visitors. It reached all the way into her dream-like parts and she thought of her travels to that eerie underworld, where they had stayed for two nights, negotiating with its people. Nanda had finally given in and let her people decide for themselves what they wanted to do. Most of them had decided to come along, and Sera and Soledad had with great relief, started to walk back with the group. Nanda had stayed behind with those who didn't wish to go. Sera admired her loyalty and saw how she let her people go, because she wanted the best for them. Hans had come with them. Nanda had not been happy about that. When the last of the group had left the alcove there had only been twenty of them left, gathering around the fire.

More and more people gathered at the center, mingling with the visitors until there were no apparent difference to the yogis and the Mole people. All underground groups connected to MOSA had been informed on the happenings and were now settling in, chatting, meditating or sleeping on the couches, chairs and pillows. Sera watched the ripening activity of the place, as if she wasn't part of it. Was it only a dream she had entered or were there no longer any boundaries between dream and awake? She saw again the colors surrounding everybody, as if her eyes were betraying her. It was no longer a dream only. The time was near, soon all things would come together, merge into that great

white light, but no one seemed to be aware of this. There was no time or space left to wait, and yet everything was still. George still hadn't appeared from his room, which he spent most of his waking and sleeping hours in.

Soledad and Hans sat next to her. Charlie and Benjamin were filling their empty stomachs with food and strength in the kitchen. Their hopes were still low, but they were opening up to a different future if not for themselves then for the ones coming after, and even Charlie found himself laughing and talking to others than Benjamin and Casa. Sera got up from her chair with a sudden movement, almost knocking it over. It caused a turning of heads in the room for a brief moment, then they went back to themselves again. Only a couple of people didn't move, engrossed in meditation.

"I just don't get it," she mumbled to herself.

Sera couldn't sit still anymore. This gathering was something she had thought about for weeks now, even in her dreams the ideas had come to her, spilling onto her like words of poetry. It was fine when no one was sitting outside his door, waiting for him to keep an appointment or simply attend someone. But what could he be doing now? They had been waiting for his final say in this matter for a whole day. Everybody agreed that they had to have his approval, before they could start the next phase. She knew they were wasting time. Precious time. Sera could feel the future pulling in her, like a force of gravity. She didn't need his confirmation, not today. Everything was clear as the rain, they had been waiting for in their lives.

Soledad smiled to Sera, trying to feed her some encouragement. Sera showed such strong will and impatience, something which could easily lead a group of people. There was a certain higher structure to this situation, Soledad sensed. They all had the appropriate gifts, each one of them, every stone of this mountain served a purpose, and it was indeed time to leave. Soledad felt assured gazing into Sera's eyes.

"We will leave soon, my dear," Soledad said.

Hans sat quietly, contemplating something, but heard Soledad's words. Nodding.

Sera turned her face toward the door, feeling a little more at ease listening to Soledad. She had a feeling that Doru was there, but it wasn't him. It was Michael coming in the door. Earlier, Doru had come and quickly left again, excusing himself. 'I missed you,' he had managed to whisper with a playful smile in her ear. Like so many other times, his presence was too brief. She didn't want him to leave, ever again. Since he began helping out George with the school, the teaching and the running of it, she had rarely seen him. Only glimpses of him here and there. It was as if he had his separate life, which she wanted to be part of, but which he, for some reason, was unable to share with her. There was no room for her right now, and she wondered if there ever would be. She was looking for doors to open with him.

"I'm gonna go and see him. We're wasting time. It's been two hours," Sera finally said, her legs sore and restless from standing in impossible positions.

Soledad got up too. Her face smiling, her hands sweet and loving. Sera wanted to cry. It seemed she had lost something. A part of her was leaving, slowly, deliberately.

"He's part of this too, you know. Doing his share, praying for all of us."

"But we have to do something. We are here, aren't we? He'll let us wait forever like a concerned parent." *Because that's what he does. Wait, Sera thought. Wait for life to write itself, because he has seen it all happen so many times before. How can he bear it?*

On their way up to his room, they met Doru. He came from his room.

"Let's go," he said briskly and smiled. He took Sera and Soledad's hands.

"Let's go," he repeated.

And so they repeated this mantra to everyone they saw, and after that no one spoke. Then they started walking.

Outside the center, even in the corridors leading to the Underground tunnels, where no machines regulated the temperature and climate, an unearthly density in the air marveled them like when the morning mists arise out of the grounds by the rays of the early summer sun. The earth was ready for this day, its scent and colors sprang forth like flowers. Spirits who for years had awaited the changes to come joined them in the tunnels. Sera could hear their whispers penetrating her. They were encouraging them all to move on, into that not so faraway land, still beyond their imaginings. She sensed the longings of the people who had lived in the Underground most of their lives. They yearned for something they had long forgotten what was, which, like a memory deeply stored in their cells, they couldn't escape. And today it would begin.

They were all aware of the rules; no speech nor aggression. Only mindful, silent walking. They had decided to split up in groups, to seem less overwhelming at first, as they walked the corridors and tunnels of the Underground. And though it was late at night they anticipated that there would be some people. They had discussed various reactions that would likely arise, people talking to them, agitated by the strangeness, Keepers gathering to make order, arresting people from the crowd, provoking to split the group. Their strategy was clear. Nobody uttered a word and nobody played along with the Keepers. Once they gave in to the Ustodians' reactions, which were merely projections of power, they might as well split up the group and scatter. Their strength was their number and their silent, firm determination. It would cause confusion and reflection. Their meditation was about transforming those who still remembered a longing within, and bringing higher awareness and compassion to all the Underground people. They would be the mirror, in which everybody could look for answers. Words weren't needed in this process. They would only confuse the frail mind,

which so easily was distracted.

The route they took had been carefully planned with the help of the Mole people. They knew the maze-like path systems beyond the populated areas that like veins ran along the straight-lined corridors and streets of the Underground. For both the MOSA people and the Mole people, these areas were a sanctuary. They would pass through the West Fourth Market onto the eastern part of the city, risking exposure to the large crowds, and Keepers who routinely appeared here in the center of the city. From there they would split up in smaller groups and slowly walk north along the railways via hidden paths, until they reached the 43rd cross-tunnel that would take them to the Ustodians' headquarters at the First Avenue section.

<like water entering everything it touches, we seep into our surroundings enveloping touching and knowing everything, moving toward transformation, its prize the sun, wind and sky. celebration of life>

They walked quietly into the West Fourth Market and their peaceful faces lit the place up, and attracted people like nocturnal moths, swarming in their space. Most people took one look at the odd procession invading the eight o'clock buzzing and walked on, without giving it a second thought, as if everything went on as usual no matter what. Some people lingered, appalled or curious, scared or simply stirred. Then somebody called out for the Keepers and more people swam to the spot where they were all walking, steadily and slowly. But they kept silent, ignoring the potential danger of Keepers arriving, and walked as if that was all they knew to do, one leg after another, letting other people step aside like ripples in water.

*<this moment is all there is
this walking, this silence.
we are one mind,
clear and sharp.
one thought of light,
clear and sharp>*

Sera was walking along side Soledad, Hans, Benjamin and Charlie, when the Keepers arrived to the scene. Doru was in a group that walked behind them. Everybody seemed so still, both within the groups and outside among the rest of the Underground citizens. Few people moved but the silent flock, who ignored the Keepers. Yet they held their breath. There were no voices underneath the silence. And there was no fear. Something else occupied these people, she was walking amongst, and

absorbed everybody.

<we have nothing to lose, we can only gain. what has come before, we have chosen to leave behind. what will happen, in whatever form it might take, can only go toward the light, the sky, the colors of a memory of a different reality, and beyond the secure bars of conformity, we have created to feel free. Freedom has another face, we see now, a different texture. we have released the fears of being separate, and have replaced them with faith in the love of all that is>

The Keepers lingered for a long time. There were five of them standing on the periphery of the walking crowd. They stared at the many faces, stunned by the resistance of the group, which they were unused to while following orders. Their faces had turned to stone like disabled machines, out of power. The crowd, who surrounded the Keepers, and the silent flock saw it happen instantly, and like a sleepy butterfly coming out of its pupa, the citizens of the Underground reflected on the odd silence, the friendly, smiling people, and what had caused this strange procession to happen. It showed in their open, concerned faces.

As swift as anything, one of the Keepers moved through the group Sera was in, passed her and Soledad. He was tall and Sera couldn't see what he was going for, but she had a gut feeling, and she squeezed Soledad's hand. *Faith*, she thought, feeling tears pressing on. The Keeper grabbed Charlie, who didn't resist or speak.

"Say something you foolish old man! What are you doing here? You may as well speak. We will have you all arrested soon."

Another Keeper passed Sera and Soledad and helped the other to take Charlie out of the crowd. They were having trouble with the movements of the procession, which didn't comply with the Keepers coming from the side and pulling one of them out.

Everybody knew that the Keepers had picked a victim, the weaker of the marching people. Everybody kept walking. Sera too, while she held tight onto Soledad's hand as if Charlie's life depended on it. She never looked back, but she listened for those voices to tell her what was going on. She wanted to run after those people, and make them stop their games, but she knew it would have the opposite effect, it would only feed too well into their reality. Now, the Keepers were separate. The confusion would likely cause them to think about what they were doing instead of instinctively acting according to their structures.

Somebody laughed behind them. It was one of the Keepers.

"They don't care about you old man! Tell us what is going on, so that we can all go home and rest assured," the Keeper's voice quivered with spitefulness.

When the first group had passed and Sera was out of earshot, Doru stepped out of the procession and confronted the Keepers. With a low whispering voice, he became the first in the group, since they left the center, to break the silence. No one heard what was said between Doru and the Keepers, but it was clear they had a discussion. Shortly after, the Keepers let go of their victim and Charlie rejoined the procession, searching for Benjamin, Sera and Soledad.

Doru smiled to the Keepers, the promise of truth and bliss shone in his eyes. The Divine forces protected him, and they had spoken through him. He wouldn't be able to know what he had said or done, but the Keepers laughed and seemed to have released the anger they had held onto out of frustration. To some people, who could not see what was going on, because they were too far away, the laughter sounded like the cry of wild animals, or the lament of sadness.

When Charlie caught up with the front group, out of breath but still smiling, Sera let out a little sigh. She knew that this was probably just the first barrier to cross, and the smallest of them all, but it worked, whatever they were doing. She was curious to what Doru had said, but she didn't utter a word. *Thank you for taking care of Charlie*, she said within.

Focused again on the physical world, Sera watched the many faces surrounding her; the sooty Mole people and their children, clinging onto their mothers frightened by the light; and the faithful, friendly MOSA people, who carried their bodies with pride and joy. And staring at the children's faces and the many people walking hand in hand, the crowd of motionless bystanders grew in size. They were the faces she had seen a hundred times before on the trains, the platforms, in the shops, only they were looking this time. They had an object of observation, and they didn't hide it. If she squinted her eyes slightly, she could see small lights around them. The shape of their inner longings; no longer to be alone, to be love, and come out of the dark into life.

A young woman in a khaki colored uniform, her hair trimmed and her body slim and swift, and a tall, thin man also dressed in the same kind of uniform passed them going in the opposite direction, but by the same impulse, a glance at each other, they both turned around, and walked with the procession. They didn't ask any questions, only acknowledged the other people in the group by nodding, and joined them like two run-away sheep returning to their herd. After that another and several others joined, most of them had young, firm faces, some of them came out of shops; one, a shopkeeper, took off in the middle of seeing a customer. The procession grew like a tree spreading out its branches to the sky and its roots deep into the earth, while watching the spinning, wheeling world unfold in all of its changeable, yet gloriously eternal colors.

<we are every breath of air, every stream of blood, and every smile of the strangers crowding the street tunnels. pulsating and beating with its endless rhythms, we are the heart of the world, turning in its ever-expanding, loving arms. together merging like sky and earth,

protected by the sacred silk of the Universe, we fall out of the night. stumbling, learning, searching in this indefinite orbit of whirling, we form bridges across the divine spaces. we are a collision of spirit and matter. the children of the Universe>

They walked through most of the main streets of the markets and had no more encounters with the Keepers. Charlie, Benjamin and Casa were leading the group, followed by Sera, Soledad and Hans, and the rest of the first group of people, which now had grown half its size. Just before the entrances to the trains, Charlie and Benjamin turned onto some narrow corridors, which ran along the train tracks, only separated by paper-thin walls. They had to walk three and three in the corridors where the ceilings crouched and the walls wept like old women. Every time a train passed by on the other side of the walls, their eardrums shook. Most of them were used to the life in the corridors, and the rest of them were so entranced by the light and colors enfolding the procession that their bodies no longer felt any pain or fear.

They walked for a long time through the slim, dark corridors along the railways, mostly in silence. If anyone uttered a word, it was in whispers. They moved without much effort, floating through the corridors as if something like water or spirit lifted and carried them gently. They entered other markets, other stations and new crowds of people, and then they finally came to the newly built street tunnel running along the old 3rd Avenue on the eastern side of the island. All that time, they managed to avoid the Keepers, spreading into smaller groups of ten or fifteen people.

They remembered the story like fragments from last night's dreams that once just above, the voices of a different world rose, and now silence governed that newborn sky. Their silence had become the silence between earth and sky. They were already there, above the city below. Their silence reminded themselves and all of the citizens of the Underground of that place like a story once told, but soon forgotten. More and more people joined them, midst the busy noises of the Underground where people's voices blended with the loudspeaker announcements, and the growls of the trains fluctuated.

It was clear to Sera, Soledad and Hans, who were still walking together, holding hands most of the time that another confrontation was inevitable. They couldn't just walk up and out, somebody would try to stop them. They would have to plead with the Ustodians, and it might take days. It was hard to tell why the Ustodians hadn't done anything yet to stop them. They had become a potential danger to the status quo. Everybody in the street tunnels stepped aside now for the procession, as it floated through with the strength of water and the firmness of rock. It was harder to keep the silence now with the more than eighty people walking, and the groups were difficult to keep apart. They were all coming together. Some people had questions, others were impatient, strangers to the ways of meditation. But with whispers, they maintained a calmness over the procession. Sera hadn't spoken

since they left the center. And the more they walked in that silent state, the more peace she felt within. She noticed that people looked at her differently, with a greater sense of respect.

Press people with cameras had showed up, and followed the procession from a distance. For the ones that didn't know about the procession, they took the role of stepping in to give their take on the story. Even they spoke in whispers, respecting the silence. Also a group of Keepers, rapidly growing in size every minute, watched impatiently from a distance, ready to strike by any sign of weakness, like predators. Still, they kept walking, close together; their power their silence....

The Ustodians' building was well protected by the tall, rigid iron gates and groups of Keepers guarding the thick walls. They hadn't planned what to do, when they arrived to their destination. They hadn't thought it possible that they would arrive like they did; whole, sane, still silent and a much larger crowd than when they started walking. They could have torn down the gates and security equipment by their sheer, raw force. The higher powers were with them, and they could walk through water and fire, but the real challenge was to transform and be transformed. The will power of their Ustodians was strong. Could they break through it without the force of violence?

'A city without differences, without poverty or wealth, without material worries, without racism or religious disputes', the Ustodians had reclaimed it. In this world, they said, there were no Gods to lull man asleep. They said that this city was a living proof that man could create, transform and truly change. Now it was as though the silence reclaimed what lay hidden behind their words.

They all gathered outside the main gates to the Ustodians' headquarters where the Ustodians were said to live, though no ordinary citizens had seen them or stepped foot on the grounds of their headquarters. For all it was worth, the Ustodians could be living on the other side of the world. All of a sudden somebody walked through the crowd, making people step aside, and everyone turned to look. There was something so extraordinary about this ordinary looking man. Did he touch the ground? And what was that strange circle on his forehead? They all felt it, completeness and calmness. They all gave in to the feeling. And for years after they would talk about him, trying to figure out what had happened, if he had really been there. The man walked to the other end, his back against the iron gates, so that he faced the crowd. He looked at everybody present and smiled.

After a long pause, George spoke.

"Remember we are not here to reason with violence. We are here to be light. When they too see the light, they will let us go. And we will walk the grounds again. Let's write a letter to them, requesting they come speak with us. Then let us wait for the fruits to ripen."

His voice pervaded all, his body beamed in the dimly illuminated paths of the Underground. Swiftly George walked back into the lake of people, drawn together like magnets in front of the security gates by the end of the 43rd path system, and soon he disappeared.

When George had left, Sera, and the others from the MOSA center gathered and sat down to begin constructing a brief letter, in which they invited the Ustodians to form a dialogue. The letter was delivered to one of the Keepers, who was on guard. When he asked who it was for, the messenger merely made a gesture of the hand, pointing toward the headquarters. The Keeper understood and walked off.

Nobody had uttered more than a whisper, and so it would stay for more than two days. They would wait in silence for as long as it would take, for as long as it was possible. George had managed to catch everybody's attention, even the newcomers that really knew very little, but what they had been told by the press people or had seen on the news. Curiously none of the loudspeaker announcements dealt with the situation. The Ustodians kept their silence too.

Doru joined the MOSA group and gave hugs to both Sera and Soledad. They had brought nothing with them and were sitting on the bare ground. Sera looked around her, scanning the many smaller groups that had all settled down in front of the great gates. Some people had brought blankets, others were sitting on their jackets. It was warm enough in the tunnel, and there would be no danger of people becoming sick, but the ground was hard.

A short, thin woman with pale skin and small hands appeared from the other side of the iron gates. She waved to the MOSA group like she knew someone there. Sera saw that Doru nodded quietly, as a way of showing recognition. A man was trying to stop the woman, his hands seized hold of her arms, but she pushed herself out of his grip and walked through the gate past a Keeper, who didn't seem to know what to do. Sera wondered if the woman was connected with the Ustodians, and how Doru knew her. There was so much she didn't know about Doru, so many questions left unspoken. The woman walked through the different groups of demonstrators, while everybody's eyes were turned to her. When she came to the MOSA group, she fell around Doru's arms. Sera listened to what they whispered in each other's ears.

"Doru, remember the dream, I told you about?" she asked and looked for a long time at him, unaware of the many people that stood around her, watching her every move.

"Somewhat, Gwen," Doru said.

He gazed into her eyes, and smiled.

"Well, the one about the dead woman warning me. I had forgotten all about the dream, when I heard on the news about this demonstration you started. I have been thinking about what I can do. She said December 20th, it is the day after tomorrow, Doru! I want to help, I want to join you. You need some blankets and supplies. I can bring it to you. The Ustodians aren't going to give up. Albert didn't want me to go..." she whispered and looked at Doru again.

"Let me help," she pleaded.

"First respect the silence and meet my friends, then if you really want to help, do. We need all

the light we can find to steer out of this," Doru whispered and let go of the woman.

He introduced her to Sera and Soledad, and the small woman gave them all hugs and kisses. Not a word was spoken, but Gwen's touch was too soft and insignificant that it hurt. She was of another world, and couldn't really exist here among the MOSA people. How did he know her?

The woman left and Sera and Soledad went to each group to make everybody aware that the demonstration would continue and there would be need for blankets and other supplies. Later that night, when the lights went out, most people had supplies of blankets and water, collected and distributed by representatives of each group. Gwen also came back later that night with a big pile of things and food for the demonstrators. She kept herself busy, distributing it all to people. And soon she blended in with the others, and Sera, who had had other things on her mind, soon stopped listening in, and let her go. It wasn't the time or place to talk to Doru about these things. But she did wonder about the things that he had left untold, and the more she tried to push it away, the more it stayed with her, growing like weeds, taking over all of the space.

All of that first night the Keepers kept guard outside the iron gates, and from a distance they watched the procession and like the Press people, they didn't get much sleep. Since they had approached Charlie, the Keepers kept a distance. It was clear the Ustodians' tactics were to avoid confrontation and any conflict. They too had once a long time ago given up on war. They were obliged to keep this promise in front of this seemingly defenseless crowd.

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Soledad woke up from a dream that first night sleeping on the naked grounds of the Ustodians. She remembered every detail of the dream as something more than a mere creation of her mind's activities. She was running from the Keepers. They all had the face of that young man, who had followed her to the elevator in the Ustodians' headquarters, and whom she had spun a web around, which connected him to her destiny. He was no longer smiling, nor following her every step with love. He was angry, running to avenge her, like the man who had robbed her and put a knife in her chest, just a few inches from death in a motel room on the West Coast. She hadn't known then about the karmic law of cause and effect, the ever-turning wheel of life. She knew not of meditation and yoga then. But she had known that even though she had never seen the man with the knife and dark, crazed eyes, he had come to avenge her. She had done him wrong and his inner, instinctive forces drove him to her. She felt compassion now. Then she had been full of rage and pain. She had felt separate from everything, and was unable to account for the cruelty of life or see that God had spared her to undo what she had done a long time ago, to transform and be transformed.

She ran away in her dream. He was calling her to him, and she ran away from all she knew that

was safe for her spirit; her home in the pathways in the Underground, where the small concrete cubicles were filled with drawings of great yogis and avatars, Shankari Mai Jiew, Paramahansa Yogananda, Krishna, Babaji, Ghanda Baba, Bhuktananda, and where the familiar smells of her first lover among the yogis were ever present.

The Keeper was walking again, and even with his back to her, she knew he was calling like a wounded hound howling to the moon, searching to bring all forces together. On waking, she knew she had to reach him. He was alive. With the powers of the moon, they could draw it all together, the great puzzle, the web of the world.

She woke again with the thought that she had already awoken. She was bathed in sweat. The hot air in the tunnels seemed to strangle her. Doru and Sera were near, they had lain down together not far from her. She missed them both now as she lay bathed in her own sweat and tears. She was scared, not so much of the images of her dreams, but of what had to come. It was clear in all of its obscurity.

I give you all, Heavenly Mother, please receive and bring me your strength and courage, let me be your instrument, do your wonderful work through me, she thought and got on her feet. She was unsteady, her body dehydrated, her mind unruly and anxious.

Sera was sound asleep, lying alone up against a wall. Soledad wanted to lie down next to her, feel her warmth, her smells, and her sweetness like that night at the center. She wanted to kiss her again, kiss every piece of silky landscape on her body.

Wisdom is closest to the purest of us, she thought. *She could have been my sister, my soul mate, someone who once stood by my side, understood me. She could be it again, one day.*

A hand slid around her waist. She turned a little startled. It was Doru, his face calm and bright as ever.

"I thought you were asleep," Soledad whispered.

"I couldn't sleep. I need to be present," he whispered back.

"Perhaps you can help me, Doru?" Soledad asked in whispers. "I have to see Matthew," she added.

Doru looked at her. She knew she could trust him. He knew of intuition and the strange journeys it could put you on. She was following a certain pulse in her veins, an expression of the depths of her spirit. She had chosen to listen and see openly a long time ago, she could not go against what she saw and felt within.

"He is ill. Maybe you can have a look at him?" Soledad whispered and took his hand.

"Perhaps," Doru whispered back.

They walked away from the sleeping crowd. A few people, who were keeping watch, traced their every move, until they recognized them as part of the group. She found a place, where they could sit down near the gates. Just behind them stood the Keepers, who guarded the headquarters of the

Ustodians. They sat down on the ground and formed a circuit of energy with their hands.

"I need for us to get in. I need for you to be protected from any harm from the Keepers. You know them, what makes them hold onto their belief. Tomorrow, no one must know we were ever there. Can we do it?" Soledad asked, as if she had a choice.

Her voice shivered. She had no choice; she had to go through fire and water, earth and air. It was clear to her. Doru looked reluctant for a second.

"This is not George's plan, is it?" he whispered.

Soledad shook her head.

"A dream. We have to be careful."

"You have a plan?" he asked.

His face suddenly filled with wrinkles.

"No, I did it before though. There is another entrance, employees only. You can come with me if you make yourself invisible."

Doru nodded.

"I know which floor he is on, but I am not sure how to get past the Keepers at the elevator. If that area is not accessible, I know there is a set of stairs, which only the night Keeper keeps an eye on every so often. First we have to get in," Soledad said.

Doru nodded again, and they closed their eyes to built up their inner force and focus, to consecrate their actions. He would have to still his mind so that his presence couldn't be felt or seen by anyone.

Om Saha na vavatu

Saha nau bhunaktu

Saha viryam karavavahai

Tejasvi navadhitmastu

Ma vidvisavahai

Om Shantih, Shantih, Shantih

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Sera woke up disturbed by a dream of disaster and endless crowds of people. It took some time before she realized where she was; in the Underground tunnels along with the other marchers, who had stayed there in front of the gates too. The hard ground had not spared her back, every bone seemed to be sore. She looked for Doru, they had fallen asleep in each other's embrace like they used to. She couldn't see him nearby. She loved to wake up in the closeness of his body and spirit. It was a

gift that would stay with her for a long time. Her body remembered his embrace.

She walked down the tunnel, searching. Most people still lay asleep on the ground, spread out like leaves in the wind, some crumbled more than others. She walked around in the area where they had settled down. She couldn't find him. He had promised her to be with her that night, and it was still night or early morning. She felt alone. And then she knew. Her notion was as tangible and palpable as the voices within. They had always been together, but had never told her.

She walked back and forth, her heart beating stronger, afraid that her feeling was truly right. She wanted to run away, leave it all behind. How could she have let herself believe he wouldn't have another woman in his life? He was a teacher, and she was his student, no more no less. He gave to her openly, but could he ever take what she had to offer? And for that reason could she receive openly?

She sat down on the ground. She felt anger rising in her; anger toward his silence, his absence; anger toward her continuing eagerness to be with him. Could she really be a true yogi, detached, loving? The ceilings had turned into an ocean, and she was drowning. Beyond gravity there were only the endless plains of space, nothing to hold onto, or nowhere to go. She had taken this journey voluntarily, but there were no more roads to take, she was at the end of another beginning.

The ground where she had lain before had turned cold now. She wrapped herself in the blanket and thought of life on the other side. Was there a voice there which would recognize hers? Would she recognize if he was there? Sera fell into a restless sleep. She thought she traveled onto the other side whereto only the spirit traveled, and where even the pain of the imagination was lost in bliss. Here she knew what the right thing was to do, but when she later woke, she couldn't remember any of the notes, she had scribbled down on the leafy paper of her dream traveling.

O

Soledad placed her card on the magnetic door lock and looked back at where she hoped Doru was. There wasn't even a shadow in her mind.

Heavenly Mother, gods and goddesses of the Universe stay with us, give us the strength and understanding to come into the light, give us the power to go through these walls.

She thought of Matthew and his heavy eyelids, his worn out body. The gentle feel of his hand in hers was as deep as an ocean, but what moved between their hands was as brittle as light through the tree crowns of summer. His lungs and organs were unable to sustain his normal body functions, and yet there had been moments of ecstasy where the whole universe lived in them. She felt empowered again. It was her final chance to give what had been lost so lightly and quickly.

No alarms went off as they entered. The Ustodians praised the employees who worked overtime. It meant extraordinary commitment. Soledad felt the bubbles in her again. *Reality is what we imagine*

it to be. Let the night in, she thought and spoke to Doru in her mind. She sensed he heard her and was afraid that it would reveal his presence.

The Keeper looked as if he was already asleep. He stared with blurry eyes at her. He hadn't noticed the presence of Doru. Soledad felt her powers decreasing, shrinking. They would have nowhere to run. Could they really maintain a non-violent attitude to these people? Doru had told her about their military procedures. There had been crueler authorities in the world, she knew from the tales of the parts of the world she was born and from books she had read. Only once in her life had she been violated, and she could barely remember it now, past anger and forgiveness. She had never hurt anyone or used her physical force on any being, so her experience in these matters was limited. How would the angry collision of flesh against flesh feel? Would the anger become like a cushion to the sensations of pain? She felt the pain of fear invading her cells. Wasn't that the most powerful of them all?

Heavenly Mother help me, shine through me. I am your messenger. I bring peace not war.

She nodded back to the Keeper, and it was then he saw Doru. She could see it in his face. The shock of breaking through an illusion. She walked on. She wished she could have held Doru's hand. The thought of his warm hand comforted her. They were in it together, she realized.

"How did you get in Sir, and what are you doing here so late, Miss?" the Keeper asked abruptly with a certain sharpness in the tone of his voice. It was fear. She recognized it in herself, and relaxed a little. *We are in it together. All of us are part of transformation. We all play a role, none better than the other,* she thought.

"I came to do some work, there is more peace at night," she answered and smiled, trying to spin another wheel like the other day, but there was too much tension in her.

"Who are you?" the Keeper asked looking at Doru.

"He's with me," she blurted out.

"To help me," she added, realizing she had blown it.

"You have a visitor's permit?"

She didn't like his voice. It held no promises. Doru stood, a silent monument, speechless and motionless. Then she realized that he was working on the energy. She had to keep going.

"No, I didn't have time today, with all this trouble outside."

"He can't come in," the Keeper's face was hard as rock.

"This is after hours, Misses."

She wanted to run for it, take Doru's hand and go through the reception area. Maybe she could push him. *We need to get in. I need to get in before Matthew disappears... I'm getting desperate. Everything is waning. Will I know when to stop trying? How will I know that I completed what I have to do?*

In that instant, Soledad heard a voice within, guiding her to let go of her fear. It was pure as a child and light as the air, like that of Sera's, but more like her mother's. It was familiar, yet new. It spoke, not in words she knew of, yet she knew from where it came and that it gave her all the answers she needed. It filled her like a warm wind on a cold day.

"Miss...! I will have to send you both away, you're obstructing the passage."

"Mister, what's your name?"

The sudden change of tone in her voice made the man linger for a moment.

"Ricardo Soriano", he finally answered.

"Eres tu de Latino America?"

"I'm a Keeper, where I come from is not important. I am here to protect the Ustodians."

"Y de donde? What danger do they need to be protected from?" Soledad asked briskly in her best Spanish.

Mr. Soriano fell silent for a moment, and continued in the same tone of voice.

"I'm losing patience...I will have to call the security department," he said out of breath.

"I used to be one of you," Doru suddenly said, his voice calm.

It was hard to tell where it came from; the soul, the body or the boy.

"It was before the Ustodians changed the rules of the game. I got to watch then. I was sick you see, dying... you are in the battalion squad, right? The highest you can go."

The Keeper said nothing just looked at Doru, his face made of stone but his eyes, a sharp green jade, were moving ever so slightly.

"You can pass, Miss. Your friend stays here. It's enough to have one of your kind running loose in this place."

Soledad thought she saw the man laugh for a second. Next thing she found herself walking the corridors of the Ustodians' building. Without much of a plan, she steered toward the elevators, hoping that the right inspiration would come. Time was running out, she could not spend more time chatting her way through the building. When she came to the elevator there was no Keeper sitting at the security desk. She looked around expecting somebody to jump out on her any minute. Nothing happened. *It is your making, God?* she thought.

She pushed the elevator button and waited, nothing happened. She pushed it again and waited. *Are they kept prisoners themselves?* She thought and wanted to laugh. She wondered if it was time to turn around. Then she remembered the monitors and many buttons. And with shaking hands she went to the deserted desk and looked at the technical equipment; a small monitor, an intercom system panel, and a few on/off buttons. *Where is everybody?* She thought. She pressed all the buttons onto 'on', except from the red buttons.

The door to the elevator went up, and she ran to it. The elevator glided upward; every sound of

it moving was like thunder to her alert ears, and she dreaded that somebody would notice this nocturnal trespasser. Finally, the doors went up, and she walked out on the 13th floor, lingering at first. Then she started walking the same way as Peter had taken her. Matthew wasn't far away. She could help him now, if it wasn't too late...Soledad lingered again in her mind. What were her true objectives for doing this? Wouldn't she only cause more anger and pain, even with the best of intentions? Sometimes there was no release, life took its own ways.

"You're still a hero, my love," her mother had told her when she, as a kid had rescued the next-door neighbor's baby boy from a beehive. When she had knocked on the neighbor's door, holding the little boy in her 7-year-old arms, the mother of the boy had come out, her face full of shame and anger.

"Mind your own business," she had snarled at her and snatched the baby out of her arms. Soledad had no time to explain the matter to the woman.

"Don't let them intimidate you. They probably don't know any better. You did a good job," her mother had said.

"The poor baby could have died if he had frightened the bees."

That whole week both in her dreams and waking hours, the resentful face of the little boy's mother followed her.

She could hear voices at the end of the hallway where Matthew's room was. As she came closer she noticed that there was only one voice, Peter's. The door was closed. She put her ear to it to be able to hear what he said.

It was quiet for a moment.

"I've told you everything now. We'd better get some sleep both of us now, and we'll deal with the rest tomorrow, my son," Peter said.

Then she heard footsteps and ran to hide around the corner of the corridor, her heart racing wildly. The door opened from the inside, and Peter stepped out. He was wearing a pale green robe in a heavy, shiny fabric she had never seen before. Soledad took a quick peek from the edge of the corner wall. She wanted to make sure nobody was disappearing with Matthew. Peter was on his own. He stood for a long time staring into the air in front of Matthew's door. Soledad felt that soon everything would fall down over her, crush her with its immense force. The anticipation overwhelmed her beyond reason, and all the yogi techniques she had practiced for those past eight years seemed lost. All she knew was that God was there, in every beat of her heart, in every movement of her muscles. Her body and soul had never been so alive.

When Peter finally took off and vanished down the hallway, she came out of her hideout, hands shaking and knocked as gently as she could on the door. Nobody answered. She knocked again, a

little harder. It was quiet like at the bottom of the sea, where no one knows where they are going. There was no up or down, just an embracing darkness. She opened the door slowly and stuck her head through the opening. She drew a sigh of relief when she saw Matthew on the bed, alive, better it looked. He was resting. There were no more tubes linking him to an apparatus. She felt more energy moving in and around him. She send out a little of her own without touching him, and felt a quiver run through both of them. *You are magic*, she thought. *Do you feel the Divine forces are here tonight?* She asked Matthew in her mind.

As if he had heard her question, he opened his eyes. At first, there was nothing in his eyes, only silent distance. She thought, he couldn't see her clearly in the dim night-light, but soon he finally awoke and acknowledged her presence.

"Soledad!" his voice was hoarse and weak.

She took his hand.

"I'm here if you want me."

"How did you get in?" he asked.

Soledad didn't answer; instead she took his small, dry hand.

"Where are they taking you?" she asked.

"To another doctor. There can't be any left in this city. They are trying another treatment. They still think, it's the air and the spores outside, which are still seeping through the filters."

"No!" Soledad said out of desperation. "I can't believe they believe in their own lies! I'm sorry Matthew, but your father and God knows who...they,....," she lingered.

Matthew shook his head and had an attack of dry, painful coughing. He looked away, into another space.

Silence reigned the space for a while.

"Ask him, my love. He asked for my help. That's how I knew where to find you. I want you to be well and I think...when you get out into the air.... Matthew, it's not the spores. The earth has healed itself. It took much less time than they predicted. I think it is the Underground."

Matthew tried to say something, but before words came out another cough overwhelmed him again.

"How are you feeling?"

"I could be better. I'm not dying yet."

His eyes were unable to reach out like some hard, impenetrable metal. She kept holding onto his hand, hoping the connection between them had not been lost, that a spark could still be ignited.

"Don't stop living."

It was more a plead than an encouragement. She felt exhausted within. She was holding too much onto what she was giving him. He closed his eyes. It seemed he was drifting in and out.

"Matthew, where are they taking you? I want to see you again. We are a group of people demonstrating just outside the headquarters behind the iron gate."

He didn't answer. She could see his chest rising and falling under the covers.

"I love you, Matthew," she added.

He opened his eyes again.

"Haven't you left? I am tired."

"I won't leave you until you tell me where they are taking you. When you get better, I want to take you somewhere."

For a long time, she sat with him, watching him breathe with difficulty. She put her hand in his and caressed it gently. Then he opened his eyes and saw her again.

"It's at the Jensen hospital, Sol. Now, let me sleep."

Doru met her at the reception. He had been talking with Ricardo. They had made out well. Soledad was too tired to see what purpose that could have. She just needed to rest, if there was any time. When they exited the building, she began to shiver from all the tension and anxiety.

Doru, silent as ever, took her hand and they stopped.

"I can't do all of this. It's too much. None of my knowledge works well in there. I'm afraid, I fail all the time," she felt like crying, but held back.

She wanted to stay in control.

"You are doing great, Soledad! Look you have done so much already. It's hard enough to try to lift the energy for the better," Doru said. "You can't help being affected by the powerful grip in there. I had to put all of my focus into it."

He closed his eyes to feel the moment then and now.

They walked through the first rows of people and searched the bundles of people for Sera. They found their blankets but not Sera. It was getting close to the early morning hours and soon the all-pervading loudspeakers would start their perpetual wake-up calls in the busy sections. If they were to get any rest it had to be now, so they lay down exhausted in each others' arms, and slumbered off with unrestful feelings of a new tomorrow closing in on them.

XX

She woke from a restless sleep and squinted in the dim night-lights. There had been no more calamities, but still piercing thoughts circled around and inside her like stinging bees. She got up, wrapped her blanket around her and started walking into the battlefield of sleeping people, clinging onto each other, limbs and extremities popping out like branches, roots and sticks in a forest. At the far end, outside the iron gates two people were lying in each other's embrace. All of these people scattered like leaves on the ground affectionately giving themselves to the earth that they had been serving for so long; a last time to join with their beloved protector.

When Sera found them, she had walked among the motionless bodies for a while. She had sunk into an unexpected meditation on the ultimate transformer, death. She chose not to wake them up. He was holding her in his arms like he would with her. Her face looked pretty, peaceful; her heavy eyelids and red lips full of kisses. Sera sat down next to them and watched them, as if they were what were beyond the edge of the cliff, where everything becomes a mysterious frontier.

As the city came out of its slumber, people in the procession woke. Sera felt the stir of bodies and voices. When they noticed she was there, watching them, they looked back at her, as if they had done nothing wrong; as if it was the most natural circumstance in the world, all three of them together lovingly. Sera kept staring with hard eyes that were pregnant with rivers of tears and floods of anger.

"Good morning," Soledad said stretching her arms. "We couldn't find you last night and we came back really late. I hope we got enough sleep for today. Things might pick up now."

Soledad looked at Sera, and her eyes smiled like little stars. Sera couldn't smile, she felt wounded and bewildered. She didn't look at Doru, because she wasn't sure if she could keep her angry facade in front of him. There was nothing to smile about.

Soledad looked at Doru, and there was an exchange of thoughts. Soledad shrugged her shoulders.

"I think you two need to talk," she said and looked back at Sera.

Soledad got up in a swift motion, took her things and before she walked away, she passed Sera.

"I found Matthew, he's getting better," she said.

"I'm happy for you," Sera said. On the surface of her tongue little fireworks crackled.

"Things are never as bad as they seem," Soledad answered and walked on.

Sera turned her gaze inward. There was a space between emotion and thought where she was safe and comfortable. Here it was never night or day, just soft colors and forms. After a while he finally spoke, and she remembered that he sat there next to her. When she heard his voice, she wanted him to know her.

"I think, it'd be good if we talked," his voice was joyful, as if there had never been any distances parting them. Never the mountains or oceans she felt lay between them.

"Is now a good time for you. Are you calm enough?"

"You lied to me, and you are talking about whether now is a good time! You misled me, Doru," Sera said, her chest full of tears.

"Pure, unfettered love doesn't differentiate. If it reaches out for me, physically, mentally, or spiritually, I will be open to it. I've promised myself to live in that moment of love. Through love, through the Divine union of two beings, we can become enlightened. It happens that sexual union is one of the most powerful union between people. It can transform us, the world, just as much as hours and hours of meditation or practice of yoga or any other spiritual practice. Spiritual evolution is my primary aspiration in life, it is the ultimate reality to me."

His voice was present, confident. There was no trace of guilt in his eyes. It puzzled her. He wasn't afraid of losing her, he just wanted to show her the joys that were in his power.

"You have all the right words for the occasion, don't you!? But it still doesn't make a difference, you misled me!"

She turned quiet for a long time. He tried to reach out for her, and finally succeeded in putting his arms around her. She felt the truth of his words. She had no doubt that when he held her, there was no struggle or no darkness in him. She had no doubt that she could trust him and that he would never want to hurt her, or play any games with her. To him life was sacred, and everything he did was faithful to his beliefs. She wanted to ask him why, if he did no harm to life, he had not trusted her with these thoughts before. And how could something as cruel as cheating, which had always been wrong, suddenly be all right? Was it purely a matter of perspective? He would tell her that the reality of pain only existed, because people believed in it, expected it to be, even longed for it to come, so that they could say with conviction, 'you see, nothing is perfect!' But maybe everything was perfect, as it were. And if she learned to be open to especially those things, which scared her the most, she would come to realize that pain wasn't the only truth.

Doru moved his face to hers, gazing deeply. She felt his arms tight around her, holding her to

make her stay, so she could be one of them, part of their world where there was very little fear, very few attachments. It was an isolated world, because these ideologies didn't function well in the rest of the world, which had been plagued by the faces of fear for so many centuries. Not yet. Only the ones who were initiated would be able to understand and not feel threatened. She thought about it. He was taking her away from what she knew so well to something she only felt she recognized from some place before. She answered his embrace with her arms.

"I am confused," she whispered. "How do I know?"

"Most things you feel with your heart, the rest is okay. Doubt keeps us searching, reaching out for God. Doubt keeps us humble."

O

The day was full of voices. Doru sat among a group of newcomers, who all respected the silence. Older faces had joined, but there were still mostly young people; their bodies trimmed and fast, but their faces a grayish color that made them seem so much older, worn. One of them had bright red hair and his head looked like a Christmas marble in the big crowd. His face was stern and warm, freckled and pale. Doru watched him with interest. Their voices were buzzing in and around him. Doru saw the gods and goddesses embracing them lovingly in shapes of blue, indigo, violet, and brilliant white.

He remembered, the day he found the plant in the ruins of a fallen world. It had brought him so much hope; and now the roots of its fragile life had literally grown beyond its original shape into something larger than life. What he had held then in his hands, as frail as the beginning of life, had been a journey opening to him. Shortly after he had fallen ill; the body of his youth and splendor had failed on him, broken into pieces, tiny atoms where each stab of pain could be felt, identified and measured, even the pains that weren't of a physical nature. Then, the knowing that there were ways out of pain into healing and completeness, had seemed utopic, unrealistic, but now it was more real than the pain. Life beyond the body was reality. This living was an illusion, a collective dream wherein they played and learned like small children. He was still healing, searching for the essence of life, and coming closer to understanding what lay beyond the boundaries of the physical world.

Sera appeared again and again in his mind. Was she a new turn? A different flower in his life? A messenger? Had he overlooked something? When he held her in his arms there was a strength in her fragility, a healing grip in her touch, a profundity of the heart, and a softness and innocence in her delight of love. Could he have her lead as the Mistress of all, Goddess and Creator of all? Would he know his own way, if he let go and followed in her footsteps, his head bent over, his hands open, unafraid of the sharp light?

Asato ma sad gamaya

Tamaso ma jyotir gamaya

Mrtyor ma amrtam gamaya

Om, Shantih, Shantih, Shantih

Their faces were calm, and like the covers of books, they revealed just enough to awaken curiosity. He felt the changes, Soledad had spoken about. He felt them in the streams of blood that ran through him. It excited him, and made him feel free. They had been prisoners of this world for too long. He had built the foundation along with thousands of others. There could have been no other way. The scriptures had spoken of the Age of Kali Yuga; the dark age where the highest of aspirations had been forgotten by the majority. They had spoken about it for hundreds of years. There were parts of the planet that were said to have moved further toward the highest aspirations, but no one knew for sure. Since the Final War certain lines of communication had been restricted. Essential information, not only wisdom, had become properties for the fortunate, learned ones.

He felt charged by their calm trust. They whispered, when they absolutely had to speak and ask questions. They had learned quickly from them. The yogic ways came most easily to those of them, who had lived deep underground, meditating in their daily struggles with life and death. There were many kids among them. It was an unusual sight. They were survivors like little Hans, who was now reunited with his family. In this new dimension, he had become the caretaker of the Mole people. They always stayed together, their eyes squinting in the pale illumination from the Underground lights. When they closed their eyes they were at peace, instantly their faces would lit up, and their senses be sharp and alert again. They had come from the dark, and they had come to belong to the dark. He wondered how Sera had managed to persuade them to go with them. She and Soledad had spent a couple of days with them in their dark caves. There had been much resistance and reflection. Would a blind man want to get his sight back, if he knew nothing of the visual world? Wouldn't it be a completely new beginning, perhaps too overwhelming to ever be wonderful and joyful?

The others, the people from the fast part of the city, the privileged ones, were slower to learn to open up, but not unwilling. God was in each and every one of them. The spirits were truly there with them all. They moved without fear now. They were protected from above. There were no more obstacles, but doubt to remove them from their path.

He spotted Gwen, who was handing out food she had bought at the market. She looked radiant and always had a smile on her lips. She had certainly found herself a place in the crowd, always ready to help people. Since she had decided to join them, and gone against the wishes of Albert, she had altered fully into the woman he had seen that night, when she danced for him. There was no more

pain to stop her from doing what she wanted, and what made her smile and lose herself in joy. Knowing Albert and the love he had for this woman, Doru knew that before not too long they would be together again. He had seen Albert on the look out for his wife, looking into the crowd while talking to the Keepers at the gates. For now, he had no choice and couldn't join them. He was bound by his loyalty, which Doru could relate to. But eventually, Albert would follow too. Woman was the driving force of this world, and if you truly wanted to experience and live this life, she was the most brilliant path to take. Doru understood this now. He wondered if he had truly chosen this path.

Doru walked back to his group, the MOSA people, who were meditating or massaging each other. They were the ones who had resisted speech for the longest. They all felt what was going on. There was no need to speak for them. They would have to speak soon, though. The silence of the Ustodians should not outlast them. They should not end up taking their will away from them. He would speak. George had told him there were many different paths for him to choose from in his life now. There could be new journeys or the building of new foundations.

O

The second night at the Ustodians' headquarters, the Keepers surrounded the sleepy demonstrators. They stood in long rows like soldiers guarding their King and Queen; like ghosts they were frozen in a particular time frame unable to act, only capable of repeating their past life, while watching the world from the other side. Then suddenly a small group of Keepers moved into the area of the demonstrators and began hitting the crowd, at random.

Sera and Soledad were in the other end, when it happened. They couldn't see what was going on, but they could hear the Keepers' violent voices that reverberated through the low corridors.

"Go home, go home!" the Keepers yelled.

"Want to end the rest of your days in prison?" one voice sounded.

"You've all been misled, now go home," the voices of their protectors called out to a silent crowd, who passively watched as the breakaway group of Keepers advanced. The rest of the Keepers stayed in their rows, observing the actions of their colleagues.

Sera and Soledad moved further into the crowd of demonstrators, which was now gathering to a solid mass. Everybody knew what needed to be done to outwit the group of Keepers persistently hitting whoever was within their reach. People that were hurt badly were quickly moved out of the danger area and seen to by others. In this way no Keepers were touched and no words were spoken from the crowd. The demonstrators moved further and further together, their silent, fearless faces directed to their opponents. Soledad and Sera were much closer to the confronting line and felt the beating of the front row people.

After a while, as the demonstrators had become a firm block of still energy, the Keepers stopped yelling. As the Keepers advanced further into the crowd, they realized they were completely surrounded by demonstrators from all sides and in seconds they knew there wasn't much they could. It had all just lasted for half an hour, when the break-away group of Keepers changed their aggressive approach, and retreated in silence through openings made by the crowd with their night sticks dangling to their sides. The crowd of demonstrators watched the Keepers without laying a hand on them, and soon the breakaway group had put a distance between themselves and the demonstrators again. For a long time, it was very quiet. Face to face with each other, it appeared they had no more business to do. And then the Keepers withdrew to where they had been standing before, on the outskirts of the space, the procession had seized. After a while, the crowd of demonstrators slowly scattered into smaller groups again.

They waited for a long time, before anyone could relax and go about their own business. People were puzzled by the outbreak of the Keepers, and stunned that they themselves had been able to pull it off, fairly safely. Some people had been seriously injured, most had minor bruises. Apart from that everything had gone back to how it used to be. They had stood up to their oppressors. Another letter was produced by the suggestion of the MOSA people, wherein they questioned the methods of the Ustodians.

Late at night, when everybody was going to sleep on the grounds, Sera left the crowd to catch the last train to Inwood. It would be good to sleep in her own bed again; there hadn't been much of that lately. And her body was exhausted from the shock that it had gone through. It was still recovering, shaking a bit from the brutal encounter with the Keepers.

The train platform was deserted. Sera was the only one there. People had been swept away like dirt, neatly without a trace. The Keepers had done some of their cleaning work in other places than at the end of the 43rd Street tunnel. Had the Keepers acted according to orders from above? Or was the storm coming from the friction and the opponent forces working against one another, the way it had been shown to them in their dreams? Would they strike again? What would be their next move? They couldn't afford more injuries now. Sera sensed it was time to take action. She had felt the force of the group, when facing the anger of the Keepers. If the force had altered into fear, it would totally have changed the course of their enterprise.

Time fell long in the moving train, which traveled endlessly through the tunnels, away and yet closer to something she didn't know what was yet. Was it liberation or depression? It seemed everything that filled her body and mind could take both turns. There seemed to be nothing in between, no free spaces. She drifted off; all the emotions and thoughts lulled her into a slumber. It felt like she was on the ocean, rolling back and forth like the waves.

We are living in a big city with skyscrapers like the ones I have seen from the back of the researchers' vehicle. Big shiny ones with thousands of windows. There are bridges too, and water and beaches. Doru has finished making a huge colorful piece of fabrics, which resembles a parachute, only bigger. He takes me to a strange building in the big city. Inside the glass doors of the building, there is a botanical garden and some of the rooms with high ceilings have art from past centuries. We take an elevator to the top of the twenty-story building where a wide view of the city, the water, and the beach greets us. He takes my hand and starts running toward the edge. I follow him trustfully, further and further to the edge and over it. When I see the ground so far down, I'm shocked. But the ground isn't getting closer, we are floating in the air. The piece of fabric with the red, blue, and white stripes carries us like a balloon. We fly for a little while and land on a deserted parking space on top of a lower building. He leaves me there with the balloon to go somewhere else. I stand there, breath taken by the flight we have taken together, and I want more. I long for that moment. Then I take the balloon and jump on my own, flying for a long time over the city, moving slowly, feeling the wind in the balloon, in my hair and face....

Stepping into the apartment was like before. It smelled of bread and coffee. She let herself in and put her things on the floor of the small hallway. Selma stood in the kitchen her hands cleaning the table with a wet cloth. The cloth went back and forth endlessly scrubbing as if there were layers upon layers of dirt.

"What's wrong, Selma?" she asked.

It struck Sera that the hands weren't moving naturally. Selma stopped and looked at her with eyes that couldn't water.

"I can never get hold of you. I just sit here and wait like some, some...", Selma said.

Sera walked up to her and put her arms around the tall, thin woman. There was no anger that filled the space between them.

"I'm sorry," Sera whispered. "I didn't realize you were waiting...."

That night they ate the many loaves of bread, which were filling up the freezer and pantry. They put butter, nuts and dried fruits on the bread and drank pots of tea. They talked about the things that were happening in the city. Selma had also noticed that something was changing. The news were different, the loudspeakers kept quiet for longer as if hesitant, anticipating what lay beyond the silence. Selma had heard that the Ustodians were having meetings, discussing the future of the city, but she thought it was more likely that they were discussing their own future. The people of the city knew now that the ground world could be accessed, but nervousness and doubt kept them under, hiding behind their windowless homes.

It wasn't until the following morning that Sera read the mail from her mother. Things had stabilized, but were not getting any better. There was the question of when Sera could come home.

Weighing heavily was the thought of having to let go of everything that had ever been between them, mother and daughter. Sera closed her eyes for a long time to shut out the pain before she began to write. She spent a minute feeling her way within where everything swam in one pool of thoughts, pulling her down rather than lifting her. In controlling her breathing, she could look at one thought separately, detached and calmly. There were tears of fear, anger, sadness, and guilt. Her breath guided her, and let her body know that it was okay to relax in those feelings and that they were part of her, but not controlling her. She wrote her mother that she would leave as soon as she could. She knew it would be at the beginning of the new year, only a month away.

O

On the third day, early in the morning, Soledad left the procession again. No more people had joined the crowd and there had been no more episodes with the Keepers, though they were still forming a wall in front of the gates. A strange eerie cloud hung over the camp, where people had brought their own things to accommodate for the lacks of comfort. People had brought chairs and pillows, food and lamps and were sitting around in groups, some meditating, some reading, others again talking to the press that had positioned themselves at the opposite perimeters of the procession from where the Keepers stood. They were all facing the Keepers and beyond them the big gates to the Ustodians' headquarters, which constantly reminded them of their mission. She walked through the groups of people, waving to the faces she recognized, some of her students had finally come. And she had made friends with some of the newcomers in the young, vital group of people, which was led by the redheaded.

"General announcements: Citizens, beware that tonight electricity will be turned off at 22:00 hours. This message will be repeated every hour. The demonstrators' occupation at the Ustodians' headquarters have now lasted for three days and the Ustodians will be meeting for further discussion of the matter this morning. Fortunately, there have been no casualties on any staff members working for the good of the city during this conflict. The demonstrators still remain uncooperative, unwilling to start any communication and still won't move. It seems that there might be cause to use special means to reestablish peace in the city. Now back to the local stations."

She turned down the 43rd cross-tunnel and walked down to the trains. It was as if walls upon walls spoke to her, pleaded for her to break them down and jump into what lay beyond. It felt that with her bare hands, she could burst those dividers to the other place, the Ground world. Where the sun and the sky lived.

One day, she thought, our grandchildren will stand above the Underground and in hearing the stories of the past will point toward the ground where these layers of walls and ceilings, by then gray and

dusty, sleeping deeply, will still hold the two worlds apart.

She walked on, staring at the walls surrounding her. In a glimpse, she thought, she looked through the ceilings, as if there was only a gray veil between here and outside. A white sharp light shone on the other side. It appeared through the veil as little snowflakes. It made her smile for the first time in a long time.

When she reached the trains, she noticed the quietness that settled all around her. The local station loudspeakers had been silenced, there were no monitors, and the few people, who had joined her on this solitary morning were quiet too. It was almost rush hours, but it seemed that the Underground people were still asleep or frozen in anticipation. For the first time living in this city, she felt there was peace in the corridors and street tunnels of the Underground. Tears clotted up behind her eyelids. Now, living in a state of premonition of her dreams, it was almost inconceivable. It felt the way she imagined a small bird, or perhaps a butterfly would feel when it awoke to a new day, and opened its wings to fly into the world. At first, it would be less comfortable than in its pupa or nest, but it had a great potential, which it would soon discover and use to its fullest. The transition zone was the strangest part of the journey.

When she arrived at the Jensen hospital on the western part of town, she had repeated her mantra 234 times in her heart. She knew there were some things that had to be laid to rest, when humbleness would be the guide rather than force or assertiveness, but she couldn't leave this one alone. She wasn't content leaving it up to the Gods, if she was to see him again, hear his voice, feel his breath. Until after the changes, whatever they may be, she couldn't know for sure where she'd be. He was the son of one of the Ustodians, how could she know that he would be safe? She had a free will, and she would do her part to keep them together, before they may be torn apart again. Doru and Sera, she knew somehow would not be lost in the crowds. They were linked to the same force, but Matthew? Was their link strong enough yet? She knew that if she persisted a little more, she would know.

Two dark-haired and richly painted women sat behind the tall reception table. One was knitting, the other reading a magazine. There were flowers in a vase sitting on top of the table. Apart from a radio playing on low volume somewhere, the place was quiet.

"Hello!" Soledad said and the two women stopped what they were doing and took a brief look at her.

"I'm here to see Matthew Ferguson," she said.

"Miss, he is in room 3B," said the women with the magazine after having looked up the name on a small computer.

"3 is for third floor and B means that it is on the northern side of the building," the other woman said and recommenced her knitting.

"Thank you," Soledad said and walked down the white, slim corridor with an endless number of doors on either side, all with numbers and letters.

She was surprised that the women hadn't required to see her ID or to know why she was there. Was the city really falling apart? Order and status had always been of vital importance. She could walk right in to the son of one of the Ustodians? A new day had arrived, but would their wings really carry? She met nobody on her way. The place was deserted of busy people. She was curious to see whom, if anyone was behind the many doors, she passed. On the third floor, there were people in beige coats, and she passed a woman in a wheelchair in the hallway. The doors had been painted green or blue, and there were art illustrations on the walls. Matthew's door was blue. She lingered in front of it, before she opened it.

Peter stood at the edge of the bed looking straight at his son. Soledad felt the air laden with words of sadness or anger. They stopped talking, when they noticed her there.

"Matthew ...," Peter said and lingered.

Peter stared at Soledad with wild eyes. His hands were holding onto the end of the bed restlessly.

"I will wait outside, if you need some privacy," Soledad said and turned on her heels.

Outside in the hallway, she leaned up against the walls, nervously and started to count her breathing; in, out, two, three....

When Peter came out he stopped in front of Soledad, as if he wanted to say something.

"How is he?" Soledad asked.

"They don't know," Peter said, his face tired and distant. "If you can, help him," he pleaded.

Soledad nodded and smiled. She felt a strange connection to this man.

He started walking away, then stopped and turned around.

"We meant no harm. It was an experiment."

"How did it go?" Soledad asked bluntly, knowing that he spoke the truth.

"Beyond our imagination."

"Did he leave?" Matthew asked.

He was sitting up now. Light came in through a small window. Somebody had removed the protective shields, and traces of the lining of glue could still be seen. Outside she could see the silhouettes of buildings and the gray vault of a sky.

Soledad nodded and walked over to the bed.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I don't know," his face was hard and then soft, as if struggling.

"I don't know. I just heard some strange things from my father. What are you doing here?"

"I came to see, if you're doing better."

"You never give up, do you?"

Soledad sat down on the edge of the bed.

"You're better, aren't you?"

Matthew gazed at her for a long time, and she felt warm.

"Don't you think a hug and a kiss is okay, now? It isn't contagious you know!" he said, his voice suddenly full of joy.

"You feel good, my love," she whispered into his ear, when they embraced. He smelled sweet like the first time she had met him.

"What is that you smell of? Some flower?"

He laughed a little. His body was chuckling from the movements of laughter.

"I have to disappoint you, it's the medication. I don't know what it is they give me. It could be sugar water for all I know. My father is not a very informative man."

His voice turned a little more serious, as he continued his stream of words, which went through skin and bones into the core of her.

"It's working all that stuff you've got yourself involved in ... you're breaking the walls," he stopped. *And you're losing your father*, Soledad thought.

"I'm sorry," she replied quietly.

"Don't be ... it is strange, but in a way it's such a relief now," he said and smiled. "I still feel angry, but not so damn helpless."

He paused, turning in his seat. He had turned his gaze away from her.

"I didn't realize what was going on, playing with the minds and lives of so many people. And I believed that everything was fine. I thought it was all good intentions. Well, it was in the beginning, but I guess the intentions turned into something larger than life. They paid the price, you know," his voice broke and scattered in the room.

She listened and looked toward the pale light in the outside world.

"It looks like rain," she said and smiled. There was a pause, then they started to chuckle, and their bodies bobbed to the motion.

"You're crazy, Soledad," he said and looked out of the window too.

"Maybe you can really heal me. Father had this idea all along that you could help. That's why I came to the class. Maybe there are still certain instincts in him that have been left uncorrupted?"

He paused for a long time.

"I've missed you. I didn't think we'd ever be together again," he suddenly said.

"I thought, we could go away for a while. To somewhere different. Just for a little while, until we know more about what the future holds for us. I have seen that happen in my heart," Soledad said.

"What else have you seen?"

"Many roads. I thought first priority would be to make you well."

When Soledad returned to the procession there was more turmoil among people outside the gates. The different groups had dispersed. People were moving beyond groups and the whispers had turned into voices. After the quietness of the place, she found the voices overwhelming, like small explosions bursting in her head. She had to walk through the crowd a couple of times before she found some of the people from the center, and among them were Sera, Doru and Michael and Doru's girlfriend Gwen. Sera looked her over, but didn't approach her.

"What's happening?" Soledad whispered to Michael, who gave her a big welcome hug.

"There have been threats. They say they're gonna send the Keepers after us. It's a matter of the city's peace and order. They haven't taken our letters seriously."

"But it can't be for real. They're barely hanging on a thread now. We are succeeding in dismantling them," Soledad answered.

"Is it true?" Will asked.

Everybody crowded round Soledad and Michael, as they heard what the conversation was about. Soon all of the MOSA people were gathered.

"If it is so, how can we convince the rest of the crowd?" a young woman said and pointed toward the other groups.

The charm of peacefulness that had still surrounded everybody that morning had been broken.

"We have to stay calm," Soledad said and looked at everybody. She wanted to inspire them with calmness and centeredness in the turmoil of emotions.

"They're bluffing. There's nothing the Ustodians can do, now that they're being exposed. No violence other than fear can keep us down here. We don't need the Ustodians anymore, and they know it. Their time is up. The only things we have to be concerned about are the Keepers, if they start their own agenda like they did yesterday. There are a lot of them, but not all of them are alike," Soledad said.

"Where is George, now?" Sera asked as she entered the center of the circle. "We need someone to speak for us."

"We'll have to wait," Doru entered the center too.

"But we don't have time to wait any longer!" Sera said out loud.

The energy of her voice moved through the different groups of people. Its mere presence seemed to create a ripple of tension like a stone breaking through the surface of water.

Doru looked at her sharply, eyes intense and stiff. She had never seen him angry like that. It terrified her for a moment.

"Time is not in question here. We have to know when we're ready."

"And make some kind of strategy," Sera's voice was angry too now, but this time she spoke more softly.

"Something is happening and if we don't influence it ourselves, because we are waiting passively, it will catch us off guard," she was frightened by her own voice, its determination, its strength.

It was hers and yet it didn't seem to come from her throat, her body. If no one would back her up, she knew it was no longer about the city, the Ustodians or their survival, it was a different kind of battle, which she had never fought before. Her hands were shivering, so she hid them in her pockets.

Then a sudden big slam misdirected their attention, and everybody's eyes were turned toward one of the new faces in the crowd. His voice was deep and resonant, his eyes glazed and red. The rest of his face was hidden away by a big dark beard. He had been among them for some time. He was the leader of one of the new groups. They called him 'the redheaded'. He stood on something, which lifted him a little above the crowd.

"Listen. We've been silent enough. They have listened to our humbleness. It's time to stand up. If all they can offer us now are threats, we can't chance it anymore!" his voice rang in the low ceilings of the corridor.

To some people it arrived almost as a relief to the long silence. To Soledad it sounded terrifying, and she closed her eyes to focus on protecting herself from its terror.

Sera listened curiously to this new figure, unsure what to think, and thought about the synchronicity.

Doru's anger increased, he wished Sera would have kept her thoughts to herself. He had no doubt what it had caused. Deep inside, he was impressed with her striking force.

Some people started to cheer in front of the MOSA group, and soon others joined. Their voices reached an ecstatic fusion. Only the MOSA people were the most reluctant ones, keeping a calm distance. When the redheaded lifted his hands everybody was silent.

"My name is Thomas. I have lived here for twenty years. Many of us for longer. I don't know who started this, but I want to thank you. Will one of you speak?"

Slowly everybody's eyes ended at the group where Sera, Soledad and the others were gathered. For a moment, they all looked at each other, uncertain who should speak. Then Doru raised his voice.

"I will speak for us. Our leader is not here. We do not believe that violence will solve anything. We believe that the threats of the Ustodians are empty. They are already giving it up, looking for a way to retreat. I say let them go and let's find our way to the grounds so that we can build a better world. I have been there. The dangers are truly over!"

Doru had no force in his voice. Yet his words came out clearly. He was scared of the power of

his words. He had never spoken to an angry crowd. He only wanted to pray, go back to the dark and be with God. God was not here. These people knew not of their own powers. How could he feel humble among them when they were out of control? The Ustodians had never served as a threat. It was the mind and body of people themselves. Their ignorance and lack of compassion and faith in their lives. Their blindness to their true nature. They were already free.

He looked at Sera. He felt in all of his anger toward her impatience and the crowd's lack of composure an overwhelming helplessness, which he hadn't felt for years. There was nowhere to escape to. She was right. It was not all up to George. It was up to them now. It was hard though, George had been his father and tutor for many years. He had always come to him. Now, Doru felt released and lost at the same time. He had lost and regained his powers, and it was up to him how to use them wisely.

"We can't let them go!" somebody yelled.

"No, we want the Ustodians!" a choir of voices shouted.

"Let's go to the Grounds!" Thomas bellowed.

"How? How? How?" the voices sang.

"The gates, the gates, the gates," another choir of voices rose.

Thomas hushed the crowd. And it was quiet for a brief moment.

"Remember they're watching us. We don't have time for philosophy. It is now or never. We can tear down these walls! We can break free!" Thomas said.

The crowd lingered for a moment as if catching its breath. Then the voice of the redheaded man with the dark red beard rang through the space, sending howls through the ceilings.

"It's now or never! Let's go!!!"

And they were all led by the force of his words toward the gates, even those of them who were hesitant. Like the previous night facing the Keepers, they all became one mass advancing steadily toward the gates. One great mass of invincible energy, one thought, one body moving, crushing and forcing its way to liberation like the baby entering the world beyond the womb. There were no longer anyone among them who belonged to a specific group, the barriers were down, and there was no stopping this force. The crowd moved like a thick river of lava stream down, down; tearing everything on its way with it, at once separating and blending everything into its fiery, red-hot, incandescent substance.

There was chaos.

Everything seemed to be pulled up by the root, like then twenty years ago when the children of the planet had quarreled, and when blinded by strife and anger they almost destroyed their mother, who had nurtured and given them the opportunity to live and create life. Now, they were given a

second chance. The earth was greeting them, its soil vibrant and invigorating, and the smell of its new, fine roots entered their nostrils. There was a new world beyond, waiting for them. A new birth was about to take place in its untamed and wild spirit.

First they overturned the Keepers, who guarded the gates. They met very little resistance from them and many of the Keepers tried to escape, some running into the headquarters. It was clear to see who was the superior of the two. The demonstrators tore down the gates as if paper. There was a force in them which exceeded all imagination. It was stronger than any drug or substance, many of them had become addicted to in order to survive the pain of living. They entered the premises of the Ustodians, an open court. Proceeding on, they came to the main entrance, a huge wooden door, which fell down before their feet like a faithful servant.

Some people were so surprised by the power and force of the crowd that they entered a state of identifying themselves with it, attacking heedlessly and frantically anything; Keepers, walls, furniture, to the extent of inflicting major injuries on themselves and others. And soon their recklessness crushed them for good.

Sera, Soledad and Doru were also fused with the crowd, but they consciously stayed close to one another, their lives connected deeply to one another like pearls on a string. Supported and connected to one another, they were never fully swallowed by the savageness of the mob, and didn't conform to the will of the group without being mindful of their own selves.

Inside the Ustodians' building, they scattered into smaller groups again and invaded the building like ants. Many of them ran without any sense of direction, still carried by the sheer excitement of their force. Some of the Keepers were struck down, some ran away, and others stood out offering their help to them.

Doru found Ricardo lingering in a corner and he yelled out to him. All three of them ran up to Ricardo, who looked lost in the constant stream of people running through the building. The chaos had overwhelmed him, and he had sunk down up against a wall. Doru spoke to him softly, and helped him get up.

"You'll get yourself killed if you stay here, Ricardo. We have to get out of here. Help us find an exit. Show us the way, will you?"

Ricardo looked at the three faces in front of them. One he didn't recognize, but somehow there was a familiarity and kindness in all of the three faces that drew him out of the state of stupor he was in. As he got up on his legs, things moved fast for him. He seemed to realize where he was.

"This way, folks. We will avoid the traffic if we go this way," he said and started running toward a set of stairs in the opposite direction of where the crowd was going.

In the chaos around them, most Keepers had realized the superiority in strength and force of their opponent, and they had started running toward other exits, followed by streams of people.

Some people were beating themselves or others, some screamed at the top of their lungs, others again looked scared. Ricardo took them to the southern most part of a smaller building cornering up to the main building. Suddenly, they heard somebody cry out.

"Doru, Soledad!!"

They turned around and saw Michael catching up with them. They waved him over. When Michael came up to them, he took a quick look at the Keeper and then at Doru.

"He's helping us. This is Ricardo, Michael," Doru said.

"We don't have time for this," Ricardo snarled and started off again. And the rest of them followed. Behind them they could hear a crowd going mad, voices rose like the roars of wild beasts.

"The Ustodians must pay, the Ustodians must pay!" the voices hollered in the distance. And it continued like an approaching thunder. It was time for them to dissipate.

Ricardo turned at a set of stairs, which once had worked as a fire escape. The door leading into the stairs, opened slowly and on the stairs they heard footsteps nearing them from above. There were no voices. Ricardo looked up.

"I think, it's the Ustodians," he whispered and hushed them to stay quiet.

"Who's there?" somebody asked from above.

It was quiet for a long time.

"Ricardo from the front desk, Sir," Ricardo said.

"Thank God! Will you help us get out of here!"

Soledad recognized the voice and soon his face appeared above them on the stairs. None of them had moved all this time.

His face frowned with a mixture of dread and surprise, when he looked from Ricardo to the rest of them. Realizing that he was busted, he moved his hand up in front of his chest to guard himself off them. Ready to run back up.

"Soledad! What are you doing here?"

He was followed by the rest of them, all six. She recognized the woman with the black skin and the man with the big shiny glasses and the long, slim nose. The others she hadn't seen before.

"Where are you going?" Michael yelled out.

"Stop it Michael!" Soledad said.

Peter stepped backwards slowly, while he glanced at the group at the bottom of the stairs.

"You aren't safe here," Soledad said and looked at the others. "The mob is after you, we heard them out in the halls."

"They'll get us killed too!" Michael said.

"Go, go!" Peter yelled with terror to the others and they started running.

"Wait!" Doru said. "Let's take them with us!" he said to the others. "They will get killed."

Nobody needs to get killed here. The crowd won't kill us. We can help them!"

"We will get ourselves killed!" Michael said.

"I can't believe you, Michael! You really only want to save your own skin?" Sera said out loud. She was disappointed in this otherwise kind man, who was now hesitant about saving lives.

"They're not our headache," Ricardo said.

"We're all part of this. Tomorrow, you won't feel pleased with yourself, I'm sure, Ricardo", Soledad said, and so they all moved upwards, away from the mob.

Ricardo took them to the second floor. He searched for a room with a window, which they could climb out of with the help of some rope. There would only be a drop of 10 feet or less. They walked down a slim corridor, their steps loud and panicking.

"Here," Ricardo finally yelled to the group, and they stopped in front of a door.

He took out a bunch of keys and opened a door. It was a small storage room for the cleaning staff. It was full of things, and at first they couldn't see the window at all. They started unloading things into the corridor, buckets, shelves, boxes and paper rolls. Ricardo gave Sera a bundle of towels, which she began to tie together. They all helped, and soon they could all stand in the small room.

"Thank you," Peter said as he reached out his hand to Soledad.

"Let's get you guys out first!" Doru said pointing at Peter and the other Ustodians. He helped Ricardo break the window open, which had been locked safe though it had no protection curtains on.

"Take good care of him, will you?" Peter asked Soledad, his hand still on her shoulder. "Let him know, let him know...", Peter lingered.

"This is it folks!" Doru said as the window came lose and cold air flooded the stuffy room.

"That you are proud of him," Soledad finished Peter's sentence. Peter nodded. And then things sped up.

Outside in the corridors, they heard the voices of the crowd approaching. They had locked the door, but it wouldn't last for long with twenty-thirty people banging at it. The Ustodians climbed out and soon they were all off. Sera and Soledad had been in the front of the room unable to see what was going on at the window. Now, they all stood in front of it. Ricardo came through the window and started the descent, jumping the last few feet. They could see the Ustodians running away. They seemed to have a destination. Ricardo waited for the others at the end of the rope.

A huge square sunk in front of the tall building of the headquarters. Once there had been several guardhouses and a fence enclosing the whole area, now like most places in the Ground world, neglect and time had shaped them into suspended objects. Nothing could stop the people that had emerged from the Underground from running around on the big square like animals having been released after years of enclosure. Ricardo pointed up to them to get them to move. His eyes were nervously following everything around him. He was caught in a wild storm.

Doru helped Soledad onto the rope, and she glided down slowly. Sera looked at the many people on the square, who seemed to know very little of what to do in their new environment. In the Underground, they always had a destination, now there were too many to choose from. Most people kept rubbing their eyes and sheltering them from the light, some had sat down, looking like they were on some kind of drug, their bodies swaying ever so gently. Others again were running as if away from someone, screaming at the top of their lungs, others again were crying or staring into the air with eyes of terror. But all of them, when they came out of the exits, ran toward the light, tantalized like moths; they ran toward something, a faint memory they had carried in their hearts all of those years after the war.

Then the sky opened itself and large, round snowflakes filled the air and landed softly on the grounds and on the people who had entered this long lost world. All the noise and turmoil from the people quieted down from one instant to another. People stared at the strange element, remembering too well when the sky spit ashes of destruction. Some people went into panic, one woman choked on the snowflakes, another cried out of joy and played with the snow, reminiscing a world she had thought lost forever.

When Soledad hit the ground, Doru pulled the rope up. The angry crowd was just outside the door of the small storage room. They started banging on the door and shouting for the Ustodians.

"They are out there!" Sera said and felt her legs shake under her. The thought of climbing down the rope she had done herself scared her now.

"What are they going to do to us?" Doru said and saw her fear.

"Come on, Sera. You go now!" he said and smiled, looking calm as ever.

She noticed how radiant he was. Light was dancing in his eyes. She took the rope in her hands, and he helped her up on the windowsill. Looking down she lingered again.

"I love you," she said as the thought came to her and kissed him briefly.

"I love you too," he said back, and she pushed herself out.

From afar she could hear the crowd still banging on the door. She thought that it would break soon and wondered what would happen to Doru. She had left him up there.

He heard the door cracking. It was only a matter of minutes now, but he was troubled. He saw her land safely and Soledad was there to take care of her. That was all that mattered now. They would all take care of each other.

"You, Michael. Go!" he said and gave Michael no time to debate over who was to go first.

Michael had just disappeared out of the window, when the door finally went off its hinges and they came storming in, the redheaded in the lead. The man had wild, crazed eyes that stared, seeing only what they wanted to see.

"The Ustodians! Where are they? You answer me!"

"Take it easy! They aren't here," Doru said and opened his arms.

It took him much effort to hide his anger toward this man, who had been taken over completely by the powers of desire and vengeance.

"Where are they?" the man entered the room and came over to Doru, who still stood near the window.

"What's this?" the man asked and pointed to the rope.

"What business is that of yours?" Doru asked and looked the man into his eyes.

"Don't be a smart ass. We saw the Ustodians go this way. I know, who you are, you are with the MOSA group," the man said and smiled.

"You let them go, just like that, didn't you?" the man shouted.

Behind him stood the rest of the crowd, alert on their toes. Doru hadn't noticed them before now.

Doru didn't answer and took hold of the rope in order to jump out. The man grabbed his wrists.

"Not so fast. You haven't answered my questions. Your friends can wait."

Doru pulled his arms to him in a quick movement and surprised the other for a brief moment.

"How dare you!" Doru yelled to the man, unable to control his anger.

The man looked at Doru and sent a fist toward his face. Doru remembered the fighting in his youth, when he had first come to New York. He had never been very good at it, and this time was like before, he didn't move his head in time, and the bony flesh went right on his cheek. A sharp pain went through his face and before he could think another blow and another, until he felt no pain at all; a perfect soft light, and everything that he had known and seen in his life and beyond embraced him kindly.

XXI

25 days later...

When Sera came out of the maze of dim paths, where old pipes leaked and wires still hang from the damp ceilings, and finally entered the West Fourth Market, she stepped into a new reality. Unlike the city she had come to one and a half year ago, this was a place of light and cool air. They had torn down many of the air boosters and ceilings isolating them from the Grounds. Here and there, pillars of light fell through like giant art statues decorating and illuminating the Underground. In most places, it appeared at first sight that the barren artificial lighting had been replaced by candle lights, but it was, in fact, rays of sunlight coming through. Not only the architecture and surroundings of the city had changed dramatically, the crowds of people streaming the city moved differently. People walked more tunefully, their faces were a vivid display of colors, and their bodies were moving energetically. People were changing their ways and lives, moving a little slower as if to catch all the light they could. It was a true joy to watch. *A celebration of life*, she thought.

Since that day, when they had entered the grounds, and Doru had been knocked out cold by the angry mob, there had been strikes and demonstrations, initiated by many of the people from the center. Doru claimed, as he lost consciousness that he had risen above the city and had seen its past and future glories. In a flash, he had traveled far beyond this dimension of the world. He had quickly recovered from the few minor concussions, and soon after he had involved himself in the future of the city. There had been a new group of people from the old elite, who had wanted to take over the city, when the Ustodians left the city. After much turmoil and struggle, some man-to-man fighting without any of the deadly weapons that had been so cleverly abolished years ago, the last remaining people of the old rule had finally abandoned their ambitions and departed. The New City Committee had been formed, which was to take care of the city, until a democratically chosen committee had been established. There were a lot of things to surmise in their new city. They initiated many various projects in order to get the citizens integrated into the process of reconstructing, rethinking their city, which was rapidly changing with or without their intervention. Once everything normalized more or less, and people adapted to the new ways, there was a whole

new city to explore right at the top of their Underground home, they had grown so used to living in.

A woman wearing a big, blue coat stood under a light giving shaft, her dark face and hair mantled in its wondrous substance. Sera walked over to the woman and stood close to her. The woman's face was hazel, a smooth, silky impenetrable color, and her eyes were rusty green like the hot summer grass. Sera wanted to hold her, smell the skin of her neck. The woman looked up at Sera for a moment and smiled. Then she turned her gaze toward the light again. When Sera heard her voice, she thought for a minute she was speaking directly to her, but the woman didn't speak out loud.

I lost my friend up there. The light took her. You took her. I wonder if this is your true face. You play with me and fill me with warmth, which I cannot grasp. It stirs me, like small electrons. You make me both afraid and curious.

"God blesses you, Janna," Sera mumbled to the woman and walked on.

She felt the woman stir and turn to look at her, but Sera didn't turn around. In her mind, she held the image of the woman wrapped in light, and filled with the ecstatic presence of God.

Sitting down on the train seat, she remembered the plastic bag from George, which she had placed carefully in her backpack, as if it were some sacred relic, which shouldn't be touched or moved too much. When somebody sat down next to her, she had to move her bag to avoid anyone touching it accidentally.

"God bless you and your mother", he had said as he put one hand on her forehead and held the bag with the other.

She could still feel his cool hand on her forehead. It gave her a strange feeling of comfort and faith. Light energy going through her veins, a buzzing that had given her a sense of feeling rested. The bag consisted of a blend of herbs. She trusted George to know that it was what she needed. He told her, it had to be cooked for ten hours before taken in, three times a day for as long as the bag lasted. There was a lot of it.

"But you must accept that where there is no will to live, there is no healing", he had said.

She knew about that. Charlie had left them, even though his life was full of hope now after the great demonstration, when he could finally see the light, he had missed for so many years. But surely Mia wanted to live, she was not like Charlie, at the end of her time. Sera would have to show her all the gifts of the world, which were worth living for. When she showed her, what she had seen and experienced, Mia would want to live.

The faces on the train seemed to be looking at her, wanting to tell her something. She closed her eyes and felt joy from within her chest. It was the faces of God, trying to reach her. She smiled. She remembered the fear she used to have, perhaps it wasn't there anymore, because she could finally breathe normally again. Maybe it was that simple. Now, there was light and air enough for her to breathe all the way into the depths of her body, nurturing all her inner organs, releasing all tension.

She had forgotten what the fear had been all about, why it had seemed so true. She knew it could return, but she would remember that it wasn't the only state of mind; there were many others for her to be in, to experience.

In the middle of the tunnel, the train suddenly stopped and stood still for a long time. Only a few persons seemed affected by the unfamiliar situation. A man was standing up against the exit doors, his hands nervously moving back and forth in bouncy, fluid gestures as if he was playing the piano or conducting an orchestra.

"It used to be like this before the Ustodians came, trains always running late. It was a matter of faith more than a timetable. People were always late, unless they got lucky with the trains and the traffic," an elderly man with a gray beard and a big blue hat explained to his neighbor with a big grin. His gaze, though, was directed to people around him, whom he could look at from a distance.

Sera got up, carefully picked up her bag, and walked over to the man whose hands still moved frantically.

"Would you like to have my seat?" she asked.

He stopped and looked at her for a long time.

"Thanks," he mumbled and sat down.

When his hands started to shake again, the train slowly got back into motion. She sensed his gaze again, but it felt okay. There was no harm in him, no harm to be caused in her. She had decided that whatever happened in her life wasn't pain even if it may feel like it. It was all gifts of the higher powers, directing her, guiding her.

Opposite Sera, a little boy sat on a woman's lap. He was playing with her jacket, which had shiny, large, round buttons and big holes to fit them into. He stuck his small fingers through the buttonholes. Sometimes, he would attempt to fit two or three fingers into one. Doru had told her that once the city had been full of little kids and dogs. It had filled the city with a sense of purpose, completeness. Since the Ustodians left the city, the children had come back, as if they had been hiding in the closets and now were allowed to show their faces to the world. She could hear and smell them everywhere, babbling, singing and playing.

She took the train to the end station, one stop further than she usually did, before they opened the Grounds. It was her new routine. She would take the flight of stairs to emerge above the Underground and walk home through the park, past the Cloisters, the trees and the river. Just before she entered the world above, she would take a guess of the weather. It had snowed a lot during that month. She had bought at the market, a big colorful sweater and a big black, woolen coat to stay warm, when she went on her walks. They said it was good news that the cold had come back. The cold would kill any remaining biological organisms from the Final War that may still be floating about in the skies above. The earth and sky were healing.

A brisk wind instantly put some color to her cheeks, and she stretched her arms toward the sky and put her head back as she reached the grounds. Her guess was partly right. She saw the deep blue first. It felt like plunging into the ocean. Then she saw the clouds; the different white and gray nuances created different layers and shapes. She had forgotten about the clouds, how she would watch them change and move as a child, and see the shapes of familiar forms in that strange, untouchable substance. She remembered now, and saw big cats and faces floating past her from a different reality.

Snow still covered most things in the world above, below the sky; naked tree branches, roof tops, old broken buildings, window panes, walls, tie anchors and other building parts, which stuck out for the snow to land on, on its way to the ground. The snow on the pavements and the ground had melted away, except from the places where dead leaves had cluttered and lay like a protective quilt.

She made sure not to step on the white, soft areas, to protect its pureness from being corrupted by her footsteps. She had been five years old the first time she saw snow. Her father had taken her on a weekend trip to the Mount Tongariro National Park. It never snowed on the northern parts of the North Island, but here in the midlands, in the mountains, it was cold enough for the flakes to take over the landscape. The first thing she noticed was the light, which seemed to come from everywhere as if thousands of little suns inhabited the white layers of shiny dust that crackled as she stepped onto it. The second thing she noticed was the briskness of the air and the smoke that floated from her mouth when she exhaled, as if there was a fire burning in her. Her father told her it was her breath, it was warmer than the air and had the same effect as fire would, though much milder. Playing with the snow, which made her hands cold and fiery, was never as much fun as looking at it and leaving it as it was, lying so beautifully like an embroidered blanket on the ground. She could sit for hours looking at the magical nuances and colors of the white powder.

It wasn't that cold for a winter's day, considering they had just had snow. She stretched her body another time before she began to climb the stairs to the park. She recalled the many hikes, hills and mountains she had climbed at home, when she was a kid. At some point, when she started growing into adulthood, she had lost that elegant flow of her body, that confidence and balance. It had returned now, when she was doing yoga almost every day. Doing yoga was like climbing mountains, the process of getting to the top or bottom was the goal, for every step had to be focused and stable, in harmony. Every step was a meditation on the present moment, and the previous or next step never mattered, for lingering would break the concentration and balance. There was a peacefulness and clarity in climbing, which she had now found in yoga. Ea had once spoken about that, she recalled vaguely, but at that time it hadn't made any sense to her that the peculiar habits of her grandparents could ever have anything to do with her life.

At the top, she stopped and looked at the city spreading out in the horizon. It stood out like a

huge, shiny monument, the city of the Heavens. The snow shone and glittered like diamonds on rooftops, windowpanes and trees. She looked at her neighborhood, the Cloisters, the many apartment houses, and the empty streets. There were no people to be seen just the soft, untouched white sheet. She could be the only person left in the world. The vastness of the thought thrilled her. Some parts of her country would be just as desolate, but those places were wilderness, not city.

The climb down was more of a walk. Most staircases were in desperate need of restoration, and she had to keep her mind on where she was walking. She was hot and sweaty, when she came to her building, which had been made accessible from the street. She entered an old, creaky door, which needed repair and renovation so badly that she thought it would fall off its hasps every time she opened it. She had taken the initiative to tear down the boards, fastened with nails on the door, which in its time had only helped some in isolating the building from the outside air, and had made it impossible to use the exit from the outside as well as the inside.

She put her card through the slot and wondered when they would take those machines away, and if she would ever see the changes that would happen to the city. Perhaps one day, she would get the chance to come back and experience a different city all together.

O

The sun shone through a thick dark cloud and hit the cracked pavement in front of them. The wind was thick with cold, and Soledad watched her breath melt in its presence. Her arms and shoulders were aching from all the many days she had supported him, but it didn't worry her, she felt blessed to be helping. She was happy to be with him. She was waiting for his full recovery with joy.

"Look, Sol!" he said and pointed to the light. "Imagine that!" He started laughing, his face lit up, and she smiled.

He had also laughed the day, she decided to come and take him out of the hospital. It had been a week after they had climbed the walls of the headquarters and Doru had been knocked out by the redheaded. For one day, the two lovers, who had meant the most to her in her life, were in the hospital. Sera had been there too. She was no longer angry with her. It took courage and patience to follow the road they had taken, and Sera hadn't had much time to create her own feel for things. Everything had gone so fast. Suddenly, Sera found herself involved in a strange world, and it had been a lot to handle. Soledad remembered her own experiences from the beginning years among the yogis all too well.

How oddly it is, Soledad thought. The world consists of so many realities or levels of being. And none of them are actually wrong or evil. There is always some reason for their existence. The main obstacle is often that we chose or create the wrong ones. We let ourselves be swept away by wrong inclinations and

selfish motives that lead to an even deeper level of selfishness separating ourselves from everything that can make us see beauty and love.

They walked down to Chambers Street, which was easier to access, and crossed the old highway, which resembled those ones that spread all over Florida. Only this highway had too many cracks and holes to make it a smooth ride, if they had had some kind of vehicle. A lot of streets and buildings in this neighborhood had been completely damaged by the wear of time. The snow and frost had made the streets very slippery, which meant that it took much longer for them to walk, and she had to support Matthew so that he didn't trip. It would take half an hour for them to reach the Hudson River, even though it was only a few blocks away.

When they reached the boardwalk that ran along the river on the West Side of the lower parts of the island, Matthew had to sit down on one of the many benches located in the area. For the longest time, they sat there looking at the river flowing past them in the silent air of the sleepy city. People still didn't go out much, she had noticed. Usually on their walks they wouldn't see a soul. It was as if the world of human beings had perished, and they were the only two left in a world that swallowed its heartache in a silent sob. On the other side of the river more houses and buildings rose like phantoms in the early misty winter light. A seagull circled around them for a while. It cried out a lamenting plead to them, but they had nothing to offer it.

She took his hand and stared at the indecisive sky. The sun had hid behind another cloud leaving a cold dampness in the air. He hadn't said anything all morning, but he had a lot of energy today. He preferred to contemplate his mornings, waking up from his dreams and sometimes nightmares. Since she took him back home from the hospital, he was looking better and better with every day that passed. He still had his troubles, but Doru had been there a couple of times doing his healing work, which had given him much of his strength back. Her feeling was that hospitals drained people of energy. This arrangement gave him a sanctuary to rest in, but further healing had to come from action, inner as well as outer. He had to begin believing that he could also be well. Hospitals often had the opposite effect. It would let you stay in the state of your illness, unless you had a strong will to move on. It was comfortable there, and it made you forget that you had to work with yourself every living moment of your life, if you wanted to work towards that perfect balance of centeredness, the equilibrium of soul and body.

They didn't talk much when they walked. She could hear him breathing and with her hand in his, she guided him slowly with her heart and will to win back his abilities to live deeply and not in the vacuum of his illness. She had taken him for walks on the grounds every morning and afternoon, since they got back together, after the demonstrations and turmoil of the awakened city. They had gone to watch the river join the salty Atlantic from the old Brooklyn Bridge. And it had been like she imagined; reflections of light sparkled so playfully on the surface. She could see bridges to all sides

and the two pieces of land stretching far up north on both sides of the river. And a wondrous silence reigned the place as the two of them entered the old, worn down bridge, which still stood, having survived the destructions of civilization. Matthew had been in awe walking slowly, still not feeling quite well yet, but nevertheless improving. They had walked to the middle of the bridge and there amidst the quiet, still air, which filled their lungs like sweet nectar, replenishing every cell of their being, she stopped and screamed of joy from the top of her lungs.

"My initiation into this world," she said to Matthew, who looked at her with surprise. "Join me, come on!"

And so he did. After that they went back to his place, where she had moved in. The big protective screens that blackened the window, she had removed with hard labor. Matthew hadn't been strong enough to help, but he had been standing next to her, anticipating the view from the window. It hadn't been much, a row of other buildings on the other side of his street, but he had seen his street and the light breaking through his windows, landing on his floor and walls, and it had lit his face up. She hadn't seen him this much in rapture before.

When they returned from their walk, Matthew made tea for them in the kitchen, while he had asked her to relax after the strenuous walk. She sat on a pillow in the middle of the big living area. She was quietly meditating on her peaceful, joyful state of mind. She was happy to not have to go back to the headquarters of the Ustodians, unlike Doru she hadn't felt an inclination to start working for the city. She needed to rest here with Matthew. She felt she had been on a long exhausting journey and lacked the energetic enthusiasm of Doru. It was time to recover and replenish herself.

Matthew came into the room with tea and bread on a tray, which he placed in front of her.

"Thank you my love," she said and kissed him gently on his lips.

"How are you feeling? You look good," she continued.

Matthew sat down next to her. He nodded and smiled.

"Soledad, thank you for doing all of this for me. I feel like a human being again. It means a lot to me, you know...," he said and lingered for a moment. "I feel that you were right all along. I can get well. I want to get well."

Soledad smiled again.

"In that case, there is someone I would like you to meet, who has helped me a lot. And if we are lucky, I know exactly where we can find him."

She got up and took his hand.

"Now?" he asked.

"Aha, why not. Now is as good as ever!"

The quietness of the long, narrow corridor smelled foreign, when she opened the black door. No sounds of talk or food preparations came from the left side, and up the stairs she couldn't see any people or shoes on the racks where people usually put them.

Matthew had been quiet on the train, and now all of sudden, he spoke.

"Who are we seeing?"

"Just keep an open mind and you'll see," she said and took him by the hand.

She glanced into the kitchen, as they passed it. Everything had been put away, very little food was on the shelves and there were no dishes near the sink. The only visitor was the plant, which still seemed to thrive in its permanent spot on the table. They walked upstairs and passed the living area, where Will sat on the couch with a book in his lap.

"Hi," he said and smiled.

Then he went back to his book as if everything was its usual self.

In front of George's door at the end of the hallway, the usual crowd waiting outside had vanished. The desertedness of the place made her anxious for a moment, and she looked at Matthew. His pale face greeted her eyes with joy. Squeezing his hand, she felt the anxiety wane. Everything would come and pass, and perhaps the center would go to some place new where it was needed. Or perhaps after the excitement had turned into new issues, people would return to the school to move into a different phase of their lives. The scriptures said that a society like an individual would go through collective phases, taking on different Karmas and destinies as a whole.

"Come meet George. He's the best teacher I've had. He taught me a lot of what I know," she said and knocked on the door.

For a while nothing happened. Waiting for an answer, she heard nothing, but that which hadn't manifested yet. Then she heard the answer, deep within like a thunderous sound.

"Yes."

"Hello," she said, as she opened the door.

George was sitting on his mattress in a lotus position.

"I wasn't sure if you would still be here....," she spoke softly as not to intrude on him.

"Come in, come in, children," he said and laughed.

"I thought, it might be you, I haven't seen you for so long. And who is this?" George spoke with such vigor that she thought he would leave his position, but he didn't move.

"This is Matthew," she replied to his question. "And this is George," she said to Matthew.

"Isn't she wonderful?" George asked and smiled again.

Matthew just nodded and sat down next to him on the mattress. Soledad followed suit.

"Have you been out?" Soledad asked and looked at her teacher. All of sudden, he looked much older, and she felt an urge to take care of him.

"Hans and Will are staying here at the center, and they are taking good care of me, while the others are taking care of the rest of the city. I feel so much joy for what has happened. Year 2043 we will make great strides. The seeds are finally sprouting," he said and smiled.

"How are you doing, Matthew?" George suddenly asked, as he took hold of Matthew's hand and looked at him for a while.

"Close your eyes, and relax, son," George said and Matthew did what he said.

George put his hand on Matthew's forehead and stayed there for a long time.

Soledad listened to the stillness between the two men and felt at peace. She had taken the right steps and every moment she was one step closer to home; an inner sense of belonging and equanimity.

Then George turned to Soledad and looked at her, holding her hand.

"So what was your question?"

"I wanted to ask if you could give him some herbs for his condition", Soledad said.

"His condition.... Well, the way I see it, there isn't much of a condition any longer," George said and turned to Matthew.

"She is wonderful, isn't she? One of my best teachers and I am letting her go. You know, we have underestimated women for too long, centuries lost because of that. The inevitability of life's cycles, unfortunately. Herbs, you say. Well, I will give you some then. They will help give you stamina, vitality and a stronger heart, son. You will need that for where you are going," he said and smiled to the both of them.

George got up and opened the cupboard, where he kept all of his herbs. He spent some time weighing and mixing a bag of herbs.

"Thank you kindly, sir," Matthew said and got up to. "How can I pay you back?"

"Take good care of Soledad for me," George said.

Matthew nodded.

"Sera was just here. She told me to send you her love," George said after a long pause of silence in the room.

"Really? How is she?" Soledad answered, her heart leaping a little.

She had often thought about Sera. It had been hard to let go of her. She had wanted many times to go to see her, but had thought it better to give her the space and time after all that they had been through. It took time to grasp the essence of things. She missed her and some times at night, she would long for her so strongly that she could imagine her close to her, within reach.

"She is well. She is going back to her mother soon, Soledad," George said and looked affectionately at Soledad, seeing what was in her heart.

"I'd be surprised if she wouldn't come back one day. She has a lot of courage that Sera," he said

as an afterthought and Soledad felt a little better.

"I have myself been thinking that it might soon be time to find somewhere else to go. Maybe Hans and Will would be willing to go with me. We'll see where the river runs to," George said as they all stood in the door opening.

"May God bring you peace and light!" George said and gave Soledad a kiss on her forehead.

Soledad hugged him for a long time. Matthew gave him his hand, which George took in both of his.

"Have fun in the old sunshine state!"

And then they were on their way out of the underground network of unceasing tunnels and burrows where to the light had finally penetrated. Along with the blessings of light and better air, everything bloomed anew like after a long, solemn winter and with the memory of the nocturnal-like dark in their hearts, they stepped through the path system peacefully and entered the West Fourth Market with joy. Matthew was breathing silently for the first time since he fell ill, and Soledad fell into his arms breathlessly, when they entered the grounds for the second time that day.

O

It was still strange to walk through the corridors of the Ustodians' headquarters, which they hadn't bothered to change the name or interior of, yet. There were far too many other more relevant issues to discuss and take care of. The Ustodians hadn't left the city empty-handed, but they had not taken much. Like before, the city would withstand any alterations or costs. He had faith that they could maintain the city, until they had established a proper administration of the city.

On the surface not much had changed, the city still buzzed with busy drones. Most people didn't know what to do after the changes, being so used to having everything managed by other hands, so they just went on as they normally did. After the initial two weeks of demonstrations and the escape of the six Ustodians and their supporters, people went back to work, and quietness, not only caused by the sudden throttle of the loudspeakers, fell over the Underground. It would be hard for an outsider to tell that the city had just undergone a major transformation.

He hadn't seen many people venture to go above the corridors, not since that day when the gods took their sacrifices and ten people were killed, as the citizens of the Underground emancipated. He had seen it happen right in front of him, the crowd swallowing itself in craze, pushing and shoving, crushing and strangling itself before he himself entered the madness of the powerful forces embracing them all that day.

It had taken him a week to recover from the beating. It wasn't just the physical state he was in, but all that week, he felt so much in awe and respect of having been spared by the gods. And the

vision he had been given of the city to come. It had been a clear sign for him, he had a clear mission now; to build the foundation for a brighter future. After his recovery he soon found himself absorbed in the work of reformation and cultivation. He had never done work like this before, but he was being helped from above and everything that was necessary came easily to him. Now, since he started working again, he went to the grounds as often as possible to marvel its beauty and to always remember how far they had gone.

Before he went for the exit, he stopped to greet Ricardo, who had retained his work at the desk. The men with the nightsticks no longer dictated or took orders from above, they had either left or joined the new city. Ricardo had thrown away his stick and joined them to help maintaining a certain orderliness of the flow of people, but there was no segregation any longer. They hadn't yet discussed how to go about establishing and overseeing a tenable legal and ethical system in New York. Ricardo and other Keepers had been a great help so far, while they still contemplated upon their many objectives and aims, and the obstacles they would undoubtedly encounter on the way.

He walked to the exits, which they had left open since that day. As he climbed the stairs and entered the grounds, he thought of the day he took Sera above. It was not so long ago. Fall was long gone, and it was winter now. She was still in his life, bringing him an unfathomed joy, which opened him and swept him away, when he woke up with her in the morning. Every moment was blessed and offered to him as a present. He had a feeling though that what he could give her wasn't enough. She had grown into a woman beyond recognition. A rare flower blossoming.

He stretched his neck and looked above him. The sky was indecisive, scattered clouds hid its blueness and yet in places there were windows of blue. The streets were pretty, dressed all up in their white, shiny blanket. Sunlight illuminated the dirty glass buildings and windows that were uncovered. He took a deep breath and another one, and the air inside of him felt magical. His body buzzed from excitement. Usually, he would just walk for a little in the streets and go back down to catch a train home, but today he wanted to break the routine.

He was on the east side of the midtown part of the city. Tall, gray buildings surrounded him wherever he looked. Construction was being made on some buildings. There were scaffoldings put up here and there. Occasionally, he would see a worker, or 'road man' like they used to call him in his youth, stripping an outer wall or moving debris and other building materials. He passed an abandoned glass building where people had gathered around. It seemed that they were opening a way into the building. From the dirt on their clothes and the way they moved in groups, holding onto each other, he guessed that they were some of the Mole people, looking for homes in a more welcoming world in terms of air and light.

The wind was warmer than usual and he opened his jacket. The old, neglected sidewalks cracked from timeless wear, and he had to watch his steps in order to keep up a steady pace. He realized that

this was the first time he had ever ventured to walk that far down the streets of Manhattan. He had heard stories and seen old television programs about the busy streets where people moved in waves, a chaos with a subtle flow to it. This was quite a different picture. The streets were there, but had been unused for decades. And not even if all of the citizens of the city now were to enter the street would they reach the numbers of the past.

He felt his heart bounce and decided where he was going. He would surprise her. It occurred to him that he had only visited her place once. It was so much easier the other way, the energy in his place made him feel at peace, and it carried them along smoothly. He was lazy. If he could get away with doing less work, he would. He had only made aloof assumptions of the energy in her place. He had wondered about the woman she lived with; what were her reactions? He knew to stay away from hostility and even though Sera had never talked about the woman she lived with or any of her friends, he felt why. He had lived with hostility before and wasn't interested. There was too little time for that. His life may be short. Even though his sickness had never returned, he knew that he had been given a special grant, and he would have to keep his focus. Today, however, he would visit her. Surprise her. It was time to break his daily routines.

He walked all the way up to 59th Street and went west along the park. From the outside, the park looked impenetrable and not only because of the fence surrounding it. The growth of plants, even in the snowy, mild winter, had taken over the park, and he wondered if there were any paths left to walk. The hard, gray concrete of the streets seemed to be the only thing stopping the plants from spreading more profusely. He stayed on the outside, enjoying the relatively well-kept wide street, which created a transitive zone between city and wilderness. Most of the snow had melted away on the streets, but it was still visible everywhere on the other side of the fence, resting on tree branches, plants, bushes and the tall, withered fields of grass.

He passed the park and walked further west until he turned onto Broadway, the most accessible of the north going avenues. Broadway went through a round circle, and in the middle there had been a statue, he imagined. No sign of it was left, but it seemed like a logical thing people would do; erect a statue in the middle of a circle. He knew that Broadway was different in that it turned and winded like a stream, moving independently across the hierarchy of diagonal patterns, which ruled most of the city. On Broadway he saw people again. Only right after the Final War, when he still worked as a 'road man', he had been there. Broadway looked older, its colors had faded.

He passed a tall building, which seemed to have been made out of glass. The sun glittered in its golden surface. He walked briskly. There were no sign of vegetation breaking through the asphalt in this area. He passed a man, who had put up a small table or rather a plate resting on four boxes.

"Come here and get your outfit for the grounds. Very reasonable trades or sales," the man said.

On his table there were knitted hats, scarves, gloves, caps, sunglasses and even umbrellas and

knickknacks in all colors and shapes. All what was needed to make an outdoor life more comfortable. The man was the only person in sight. Doru stopped and looked at the things with a smile on his lips.

"Where did you get all this from?" Doru asked.

The man had dark, golden skin. Like the glass walls around him, it shone. The man had no smile to offer and didn't seem to find it interesting to tell Doru where he had found his merchandise. He just looked the other way, repeating his sales speech.

Doru searched through the pile and found a golden, spotted gemstone. Doru paid the man via an old palm pad he had and also gave him a sandwich. The man ate greedily without looking at Doru. Soon, with the stone safely in his pocket, Doru was on his way north again, where he had lived for almost fifteen years. He walked for half an hour and along him, it seemed, that the buildings and pavement were dropping and falling over like old crouching men.

The sky enclosed itself in dark clouds in a matter of minutes and soon heavy drops of water poured down. At first, he didn't mind. He welcomed the invigorating sensations it brought him, so different from the wind and the sun. His body quivered from stimulation and glee as if every drop was her touch. After a while he realized the rain had no intention of stopping for his convenience, so he started running. He was still almost a hundred blocks away from Inwood. He found an old porch roof for shelter. He stood there for a while watching the water pouring from the skies. He laughed to himself.

She had told him about the water in her country. It was everywhere, embracing her world; it came as rainwater from the many clouds, which always visited the skies, it flowed through the land as lakes, rivers, streams and brooks and touched the land from all sides with salty, moving seawater. And the fresh water was still clean she had told him, so clean that they could drink it directly from the lake or stream. Because there was plenty of clean water and air, everything grew easily and lushly. People grew most of their household food in their gardens, and the city stretched itself in long, wavy, green patches, as vast as an ocean.

She was like the Goddess of fertility bringing him news of different worlds, bringing him her love, so pure like the waters she knew of from home. He had never felt so rewarded. He understood now better the dreams he had of Her, the Goddess. He knew that what he gave freely from his heart would never reach the level of love and compassion She gave, but She was his teacher and he learned from her the humbleness that he held within. He longed to see that country of hers, and he often wondered if he should go with her one day, but his heart still seemed to steer him elsewhere. There was time enough to figure it out.

The rain started to seep through the short porch roof and he moved out into the rain and down Broadway looking for an entrance to the Underground. In the New City Committee, they had passed

on the management of the opening of the exits to the local community groups in order to relieve themselves from some of the many responsibilities they were facing. He had voted in favor of it, but now he realized that it meant that he probably wouldn't find an entrance at all. He did though, after fifteen minutes of trotting. The rain had only subsided a little, when he stepped into the warm Underground, and his clothes were completely drenched. He felt alive. His heart was beating vigorously in his chest, and his skin buzzed. It was as if music had entered his body. If only he had known how to, he would have danced to it.

O

"Hi," Selma said, as she got up from the couch and gave her a big hug.

"How's the weather today?" she asked with a smile on her lips.

"A little overcast, a little blue sky. The clouds are scattered now, but I think they will eventually converge and spew more snow onto us, unless the temperatures rise a lot more," Sera answered in a light voice.

"You should stay, Sera and we'll do the weather on the news," Selma said.

"You've got a good idea. Maybe we'll do it."

"Is it cold outside? I thought, I might go for a walk. I'm tired of the gym," Selma asked.

She was in the living room. Her books were on her lap, the table, and floor.

"It's a little warmer, today. I think it'll be a nice walk. I'd join you if I didn't have to pack the rest of my stuff."

Selma fell silent. She looked at Sera, their eyes gazing curiously, kindly.

"Are you coming back?"

Sera shrug her shoulders.

"You can always visit me," Sera said.

Selma smiled. She did that more now. Sera wished she could be there for her friend. When Sera focused on her faith in her friend, she didn't feel that she was abandoning her. There was a time for everything. And people were only here to be borrowed by one another, George had said. Sera wondered if he ever felt the sadness of loss. She knew, if she recognized life as beginnings, she would understand how to be free of attachments and limitations.

"Maybe I will, when I feel stronger and better."

"My home will make you stronger. I know, it will make me stronger," Sera said and went into her room.

There were already two big bags on the floor, and she had to pack the last. Selma went back to her books. Sera could hear the flipping of pages. She sat down on her mattress. Would she ever see

him again? She hadn't talked to him for almost a week now. He was so caught up in the new stature of the city. With some difficulty, she had arranged for the ticket only four days ago without telling anyone of her decision but Selma. George had known without her telling, he rarely had to be told anything. Doru didn't know though. Would she miss him, when she no longer had the chance to stop by and spend the night with him? She wouldn't even be living on the same latitude of the world. But it was okay that way. Every moment was perfect.

Her mind was quiet, even her body. A new beginning, another reality. He would always be somewhere transforming with or without her. When Soledad told her how much joy and transformation Sera had brought to Doru, she wondered how much more growth there would be for them together. The question wasn't whether she loved him or not, it never had been. They had been together ever since that day, she found out about Soledad and him. Twenty-nine days. She had loved every minute. She had even tried to love her for it. It was liberating in some ways, a love which had no boundaries, not even fear or guilt. The abyss was good for now, but she longed for more, something which embraced more than she was capable of now.

She packed the last of her schoolbooks. Maybe she wouldn't go back to school just yet. She decided that she'd pack Mia's herbs in her hand luggage, so that they couldn't get lost. Mia didn't know what she was bringing or that she was returning so soon. It had been a week in deep, peaceful silence, wrapping up the loose ends, saying goodbye in her heart.

It was summer at home; the warmest month had just passed. There would still be time to sow. She wanted to replant their garden, so she could watch the plants grow before the house was sold and gone. When the house went, she would have to find a place for Mia and her. They might not afford a place with a garden, but if she got a job they could. There had to be some time for them together.

Selma stood in the door opening. She was giving her a long intense gaze.

"It must be hard for you, Sera. If you need to talk, I'm here. Screen me."

Sera nodded and smiled. The back of her hand reached for her wet eyes.

"Thank you," she mumbled.

"I'm gonna go for a walk now. You want to come along?"

Sera shook her head.

"You're home for dinner, right?"

Sera nodded. She didn't feel like talking. She only wanted to understand the web that life spun, the core meaning of everything. She had held it in her hands for short moments, and she knew she could catch it again. The more she practiced, the longer she could stay there.

When she heard the door shut, she put the last items in her bag. The empty desk, the computer, the cleared shelves and mattress were all that was left in the room. It looked bare, yet perfect. It was peaceful in her room. That was how she wanted to leave it. That was what she hoped to find. She got

up and went into the kitchen. She poured herself a glass of water. Her body felt like a dried fig.

When the doorbell rang an hour later, she was just passing their front door. She let him in, thinking how appropriate that she didn't have to call him then. His clothes, face and hair were drenched and he smelled fresh.

"My God, you're so wet!" Sera exclaimed.

"The snow turned into rain. It's quite amazing," he said, when they let go of each other.

"What a shame. It is so beautiful the snow."

"But the rain is beautiful too. Let's go back into it," he urged her, his wet, cold hands touching hers.

"No, not now. You'd better get out of those clothes."

Sera went into Selma's room to look for towels and left Doru standing in the hallway. When she came back, her arms filled with two towels and a t-shirt, he stood in the door opening to her room.

She saw his face opening like a little child, his eyes wide and exploring the world as it appeared to them. She felt strangely connected to him. All this time, she thought they could never understand, only love each other. She had felt safe, even though the thought didn't make much sense.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," she said looking at him. "I arranged for the ticket a few days ago. It's time to go home."

She handed him a towel.

"You better get those clothes off," her voice was almost calm.

He stood there, one meditative breath. She never knew what his thoughts were and she couldn't ask him. Some times, she thought him to be invincible, some times as frail as a baby bird.

Om, Shantih, Shantih, she sang to herself and began to help him undress. She took off the wet clothes and put them in a pile on the floor. His limbs were cold and tired, and she dried them with the towel. He stood there quietly, letting her massage his muscles and points. She could feel his bones, just under the skin. When she had first met him there had been more of him, just enough to grab hold of. Now, all she could hold onto was skin, bones, and pure muscle.

"I wish, I could tell you to stay, Sera."

Sera listened. There were only those few words, nothing beyond, nothing in between. She knew they came from his core, but she knew not what to do with them.

He stood in her room, naked. He seemed invisible, not in the space and yet there. His skin was transparent from the cold rain, but his face seemed unaffected by the circumstances. She looked him over like he usually did with her, from top to toe with admiration and love. He smiled now.

"I'll try to write. I can't promise anything, I'm not a good writer, and I will have a lot of work to do here," he said and put his arms around her.

"You're wonderful, Sera. I know you're doing what is best for you. I understand."

I don't want you to understand, she thought. I want to hear what you feel about it.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I know," he said.

His face looked sad for a brief moment, as if he was letting go of a thought, or an image.

She listened again, but still heard nothing apart from that which pulsed inside of her. She hung his clothes on a chair in the living room to dry and watched the rain outside their window.

"You haven't visited me for a long time," she said.

He nodded and took her hands.

"Let me kiss your beautiful feet."

He bent down and took off her socks, and began kissing the top of her feet, one and then the other. There was a gentleness and humbleness, which both elated and scared her.

"It tickles," she exclaimed, giggles filling her throat and stomach.

He ran his hands up her legs and the thrill made her heart beat faster.

"We'd better stop. Selma could be home any minute now."

He stood up. He was still naked. She looked at him, his body. Its skin shone a little in the trim light. For the first time in her life, she didn't feel the urge to cover him up or take her own clothes off. The fear or worship was no longer there. The temple of the soul was all that was left. The temple shouldn't be worshipped, nor should it be ignored. It was a sacred place wherein God resided.

"You can stay for dinner, if you have time," she asked and suddenly felt a little awkward by interrupting the state of things, as if they no longer were there physically.

He took her face in his hands and looked deep into her eyes and kissed her face and began to undress her, slowly like a soft caress. And soon her whole body was being caressed. Like a long held breath that was finally released, she let herself be caressed and loved, and she entered a tender and gentle state of joy, where she was and she wasn't, where there was no longer any boundaries between them, they had become one being, one loving beat, tuning into the eternal rhythm of the universe. It felt like dancing to the music of heavens there. Dancing freely.

He stayed for dinner. When Selma came back, she cooked dinner for them. At the dinner table, he began to talk about the changes and the work with the committee that was to envision and constitute a new, more open world. The city had thrived socially and financially from the work the Ustodians had done. The main work for them was to establish a group of decision-makers and coordinators, so that they could make sure to commence the development and restoration of a city, which once had literally fallen under the ground. When the foundation and the external surroundings were stabilized, higher aspirations could be pursued. Then the visions of a new world could be laid out.

Selma listened with interest. Sera kept looking from one to the other. It felt like a smell entering her nostrils. Selma held her fire and paid genuine attention. It pleased Sera, because she knew that Doru and Selma were likely to meet again. Many hands and minds were needed to build the city anew.

Doru spoke for a long time of the world he saw. None of his words were directed to Sera, and she waited inside where it was quiet. When they finished their meal, he spoke to her heart again. They sat in her room. Its bare walls and floor filled her with endless space and courage.

"I wish you all the best, my love. I will be thinking of us, until I see you again. Our lovemaking and meditation."

Before he left, he gave her the gemstone. It glowed of bronze, gold and earth. Heaven and earth together in one. He said he wanted to walk a little more, before he did his practice at home, even though it was dark out. She held him for a little while and let him go. In her mind, she watched him walk home through the dark streets of the city. The picture was very vivid in her mind, as if she was walking next to him. There was a light illuminating his steps, she saw that clearly like had it been a dream of hers. And she also saw that it was Divine love that made him laugh and smile; a reflection of all the love he carried in his heart.

She missed him already, although she knew now he was part of her, like the voices that entered her, the light she had seen, her mother who had brought her into the world, her father she hardly knew, and her grandmother who was still, after all of her fears and doubts, present in her life. Like God. One day, she knew there would be no illusions or distortions of the truest reality, and there would be no difference between either part of her; every muscle, cell, and molecule in her body, every thought, force and action of hers. She would have an all-pervading awareness that it was all of and from the same source, an omnipotent, omnipresent energy embracing everything, always.

Epilogue

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

T. S. Eliot

Aotearoa, 2043

Her voice is like mine, it fills me so. It's in me, much stronger and vibrant than I have ever known a voice so young. Her 25-year-old eyes, like of an ancient soul, pierce through me, were I only a child and not this crazy elderly lady. I know those hands and that heart. I must admit that I never thought my own grandchild would be shining so much with the Divine.

We are all back in Auckland. One big family like before, the only difference is that we are one whole now, and we know better our limitations and our endless bounties. Mihai and I came back from Romania only two weeks ago. I had a feeling about Mia for a long time. As soon as I learned it was cancer, we got hold of the herbs. She has welcomed us from her heart. I feel some healing can take place.

If she is to leave her body soon, it is good for her to find some peace and light, before she goes on the journey. She seems to be letting in some light now. She will hopefully bring it with her to where she goes next. It would bring me joy to see her at peace. There has already been so much tension in our family. I spent all those years searching for that seed he spoke about. I wasted so much energy on that. No wonder she always rebelled, I forgot half of the time to listen to her and where she wanted to go. I only heard his voice not my own or hers for that matter. I wonder, if I could have let that wheel spin a little smoother. I failed in many ways, but I did what it took. I didn't fight against the stream of life much of the way. Perhaps Mia was the only real fight I took up and it happened for a reason. I start to see the pieces come together now. A lifetime later, of course.

Mia accepted the herbs that Mihai and I got hold of after we had returned to Auckland. She smiled to me and took my hand. I felt like her mother again. I prepared it for her like I used to do, when she was a little girl and had those terrible congestion problems. I never knew what to think about it. She always detested the taste of the herbs then. She takes them without any protests now, three times a day.

Nothing really happened that first week we were back. It wasn't until Sera came back to everybody's great surprise; literally out of the blue. They had moved Mia back to the hospital to be able to supervise her condition. We were sitting around her bed, talking and meditating, Mihai, I, and Sandra, Mia's old friend since primary school. They were always such scamps, stirring everybody in the neighborhood.

The nurse opened the door. She had a big smile on her lips.

"Guess, who has come to see you, Mrs. Skau?" she said and from behind her, Sera appeared.

And there she was, a little sun like I remember her from when she was a kid, chasing butterflies and listening to the grass growing. Her hair had grown long and shiny, her eyes literally sparkled and her body was lean and slender. Almost vibrant like a yogi, I remember thinking. I felt that much had happened in those many years, I decided to leave the family and spend my time on teaching, writing and living in Bucharest and India. All those years, I had been granted to walk this planet, teaching the practice of the path to enlightenment. It was like he said 'do what you are already doing'. I remember now.

She blew me away there and then, left me speechless. I wanted to know more. She, too, had traveled far. I could feel that. And I knew from Mia that she had gone to the States to study. However, it wasn't until she told us about the herbs for Mia, she'd brought from New York that it hit me. She was always such a reserved and shy kid. She had transformed the energy, turned the fear. She had found the path of the yogi.

Mia lit up that day and the herbs started to work. Ever since, I have brewed Sera's herbs, which are basically the same blend as the one we have. We are three generations of women gathered there. I do believe the true elements for healing are present. She is better now, but who is to say how much will there is. Sera believes, she will stay for a long time to come, so that she can find a job to pay for a place for them to live in. Sera is putting a lot of love, dedication and courage into their relationship. I admire her. I feel that she has been through a lot, and yet she has kept her innocence and light. I feel I know her journey very well. I see it all before me like looking into the mirror reflections of my life. Some part of the way, I sense we have already walked together, two warrior pilgrims.

She told me the other day about a dream she had. In her dream, she was walking in the jungle through an overgrown terrain. She reaches a narrow river or more likely a deep, strong stream. In her dream, she has to cross the stream, and as she stands on the edge of it, she looks down. First, there is nothing but deep, curling, dark water, and she knows that she can jump far enough to reach the other side. And as she lets go of the ground, she knows she has miscalculated, and she sees the big, open mouth of a crocodile beneath her. She falls into its terrifying mouth, full of sharp-pointed teeth. She knows, she is doomed, and the second she touches its dry tongue, she jumps back or rather pulls herself out as she realizes her dream. She simply changes her mind in her dream, as she realizes she is the master of the script. She woke up, she told me, not so much shocked by the images of the dream, as of her will within the dream to become aware of her dreaming and to change her course.

I told her that the moment we can fully become aware in our dreaming state, we will truly know that life is really just states of being, and that we have the power to change everything. Dreams are just another level of life. Dreams are a gateway to the soul, and when we realize that, we can learn to fly to wherever we wish. And we can dream life into our making.

She laughed, looking at me kindly, and then beyond me and said with her face gloating and her eyes deep in thought.

"When I left my lover back in New York, I wanted to tell him that he used to make me want to dance, but now he only makes me want to fly, like the butterfly."

I still can't get that moment out of my old head. I am not sure why yet, but then again I don't know the whole story yet. But I know that I do feel like dancing. I have picked up that vibration in Sera. I've promised her to tell her my story, how I met my Master, and how Mia came to be. What happened between Mihai and I, our travelings together, our separate journeys, our teachings, our hopes and experiences. I hope she will tell me her story, I am sure it will be very familiar to me.