

SHC

By Dante Rosati

Chapter One

I sat on my favorite chair while I changed the strings of my guitar. I had bought the chair from a store on Bowery that sells bar fixtures from belly-up establishments. It's hewn from thick, dark oak and is cut like a chair from the middle ages. The kind of chair to do disciplined things upon, I used it for practicing guitar. It was austere, but in a challenging way that said, "Sit your butt down and get some work done."

On the table beside me crouched a small jade plant that had grown considerably since I had placed it there. The number of green leaves had at least tripled, and it needed to be transplanted to a bigger pot. This I had intended to do for some time, but had always thought of the act of repotting it in terms of the future, so I had never done it. Next to it, on the table, a blue bowl held steaming split-pea soup, and as I smelled it I was certain that there had never been a soup like it anytime, anywhere. But most of all, the fifth string of my guitar was badly worn, and so I removed it, dropping it to the floor. The brilliant silver of the new string pleasantly reflected the late afternoon sunshine that slanted in through the window, and as I picked it up from the table I thought of a silver lizard in the desert.

Contact with air turns blood its familiar bright red color, and altogether changes our experience of it, so that one might say that we are largely ignorant of the experience of the darker, blue and green colored bloods that course through our bodies. This is, however, only as it should be, for a sharply conscious experience of the darker color nature of blood is not an experiment to be carried out unprepared.

Exactly when, or how, the stray shard of A-string metal punctured my finger, I cannot say. When I first became aware of it, it was only because the perspiration on my thumb had caught the afternoon light's reflections and was dazzling the world with a display of cataracts, scintillating and flashing. This narrowed my perceptions into a tightly focused band centered on the cuticle of my thumb, and in particular, its interface with the actual nail. Within this interface, clear to behold, was a bright yellow opening, or what looked like an opening, but before I could examine it, a flood of blue-green color obscured it from view and caused the consciousness to fade from me, so that I was utterly blacked out.

When I awoke, or rather, the next thing I remember, I found to my dismay that I was not in my room, and my guitar strings and split-pea soup had vanished altogether. My new surroundings were not so much an alternate place as a black void, and my first feeling was one of panic as I sensed the disorienting absence of my body. Although I say a void, it was not the void of no-thing, but the void that looms as the blackness that we "see" when we close our eyes. Generally, we do not consider this blackness to be anything in particular, except perhaps the inside of our eyelids. What it actually is, however, is a porthole into other realms. A "void" containing more activity than our world, its extent and power threaten to overwhelm our individual flame, slim taper that it is, in much the same way as the sea or the great desert threatens our being by ignoring it as insignificant.

Suddenly, powers surged around me, in vast vortices that counter rotated and balanced each other, multi-hued and emitting what would be, in the sounds of our world, a roar greater than is made by all the earth's sea coasts combined. These, swirling and whirling around me, grew stronger and more awesome with each passing moment, so that soon I feared that this huge tidal ocean would eradicate my consciousness completely and somewhere, far away, an empty husk would be left in which I had once lived.

As a fever reaches a high pitch, then breaks and subsides, so the churning blackness crescendoed to a crisis, then relented. "I" and "It" drew away from each other mutually, until countless stretches and endless aeons separated us and I returned to my husk. As my awareness grew, I found myself returned to my room, and the percept of my blood-covered finger presented itself to my consciousness once again. The blue colored blood cast a cold, steely glow on my surroundings,

and I realized that the atmosphere was wholly lacking both from my lungs and the room around me. I would have gasped and clutched at my throat, but directly the urge came over me when the walls and objects around me seemed to burst into impossible flames that raged in the vacuum. At this, I wanted nothing more than to scream, but my lungs were devoid of air, and no sound came out. Tumbling out of my chair, I thrashed around on the floor in throes of agony as I felt my flesh charring and my hair ablaze. Blissfully, unconsciousness again took me at this point, and my sufferings, at least my fire sufferings, were at an end.

It seemed to me that there was a passage of time while I was unconscious, (in the way that one knows, upon waking, that several hours have passed since going to sleep), but I do not know what, if anything, happened in this time. The next thing I knew, I was in the desert. The rocks and sand color struck a note of familiarity, and I knew that this was somewhere in the South West United States, and somewhere I had been before. Looking around me, I noticed several juniper trees and sagebrush scattered on the ground, and that I was in a canyon that had as its bottom a dried up stream bed. The scorching sun unlocked the aromas from the plants, particularly the sage brush, and the air was filled with an orgy of scents of the most pure and delicate kind. It was then that I realized that I was in Southwestern Colorado, at the site of some Anasazi ruins that I had camped at many summers earlier. I looked down the canyon, and saw, indeed, the very ruins I had explored, but they were now not ruins at all, but whole buildings. Instead of the broken walls I saw fresh towers that bore wooden ladders, and smoke from fires rose in the still air. Not only that, but around the structures moved a considerable number of amber skinned men and women, and the shrieks of children playing were floating through the thin desert air. I surmised that I was no longer in my time, but had been dislocated back to the time when these houses were inhabited, about 1200 A.D. Dying to get a closer look, I began to move in the direction of the buildings, but found that I was floating instead of walking. I once again had no solid body, but I felt a body made of light around me which seemed to "belong" to me and which I was able to move along the canyon floor.

Before I could approach very close to the buildings, I came upon an ancient Indian seated on a rock under a juniper tree. His long white hair fell freely over his shoulders and his face was an almost unbelievable collection of deep furrows and

crevices, not unlike the landscape itself. For his age, which seemed to be well over a century, he looked very fit and strong, and his whole being displayed alertness and consciousness. As I drew near, he sat up even straighter, and although he did not seem to be able to "see" me, he knew that something had come near. He looked around, but not seeing anything, he calmly picked up a necklace made of colored stones and spoke. Although the language was completely unfamiliar to me, I understood perfectly well all that he said.

"I know not what spirit has come to this place, but if you are of Taiowa, the Great One, you are welcome. I have waited here many days for a vision, not eating or sleeping, only watching, watching and breathing. Soon it will be my time to journey to the other world, your world, and I must know what to tell my people before I go. The many hot days have dried my bones and the cold nights have given them many cracks, so that I know this old bag of skin cannot hold them together much longer. My people are worried because the water is less these last years and the crops are getting smaller and smaller. The Headpounders to the east are also suffering and have started raiding other bands of our people near here, and I am afraid that soon their raids will reach our tiny village and bring us death and destruction. I ask you, great spirit, if you are of the sun, let me know if my people should continue their great journey, or remain here."

His face had a desperate, pained look, and hot tears were welling in his eyes. Naturally I did not know what to tell him, and I felt ashamed that I was there disturbing his meditations and deceiving him into thinking that one of his people's guardian spirits had come to advise him. As I was pondering whether to go back or continue on to see how his village looked, I heard a sound behind me and turned my attention towards it. A huge gray coyote was approaching the old man through the sagebrush and it stopped about ten feet in front of him, where they silently regarded each other. This was the physical scene which I saw. In addition to this, on the light-plane in which I also had sense perception, I saw the being that came with the coyote, as the coyote, using it as its physical herald, as it were. It was a splendid, glowing light being, composed of silver and white light which flashed and streamed from a spherical cone in which other colors played; reds and yellows. This creature radiated love and well being, which was felt by the old man as well as myself, for his face clearly showed it. He regarded the coyote, but he felt the

being behind it, and it made him very happy. Light tresses floated forth from the coyote-being, caressing and enveloping the old man's body in the warm glow. As I watched this, the man's light body slowly appeared at the top of his head and came forth, going to the coyote-being and merging with it, while his tired old physical body slumped over onto the ground and gave back to the world the breath it had first taken when it was born. All around the coyote being were other light beings now, of various colors, and they came to commune with their brother who had of late joined them in their world. I heard sweet music all around and a deep drumbeat that seemed to capture perfectly the rhythm of the landscape, until I realized that the rhythm was the landscape, and the music was the luminous beings that hovered all around. The coyote went forward to the corpse and, gently picking up in its mouth the stone necklace that had fallen from the dead man's hand, started for the village. The beings went with it, and I followed also, to see what would happen.

The coyote trotted up to a strong looking young man on the outskirts of the village who was fashioning an axe head out of flint. He eyed the coyote first with apprehension and then with interest as he saw the necklace hanging from the coyote's jaws. The animal dropped the necklace at the man's feet, and he responded by crouching down and petting the animal, at which the lights of the coyote-being and all the rest flared even brighter. The warrior picked up the necklace and gazed at it, not in the way one would examine an unknown object, but as one might view a familiar one, one which had some great significance. The man stood up and looked into the distance, and he knew it was time for his people to resume their wanderings.

Suddenly, I found that I was no longer in the desert, but back in my body, or what was left of it. I lay on the hot floor of my room and the stench of burnt flesh became all the more terrifying when I realized it was my own. I was not in pain, for the nerves had been burnt away, and I felt only a numbness of the most general sort of corporeal awareness. I suddenly intuited that I had burst into flames, and I even remembered having read about the phenomena known as "spontaneous human combustion". "Nobody ever expects to be the victim of SHC," I thought to myself, and if I had had lips, I would have smiled. Unfortunately, not having lips was the least of my problems. Nevertheless, my attention was not directed towards my situation, which might have seemed precarious, but towards the cuticle of my

thumb, which I could see from the position in which I was lying, and which had apparently escaped incineration (as had my eyes, for that matter, for I could still see). Still visible in the cuticle was the yellow opening to which I have already alluded.

This luminous spot so absorbed my interest that I did not hear, at first, the voices that announced the arrival of several people. When I did finally hear them, they sounded awfully agitated, and the looks on the peoples' faces, when they entered my room, were, I assumed, the result of their first smelling, then seeing my predicament. You can imagine my surprise when it became apparent that my condition was of no concern at all to the group, in fact, they did not seem to be aware of it. Their agitation was the result of some rather unusual events.

Apparently, news was going around that a large ship of some unknown kind had been seen hovering over the desert in Southwestern Colorado. The air force had acted, but aside from flying near the ship and taking photographs and other measurements, there was nothing much they could do.

The ship was a perfectly featureless black sphere with a diameter of over one mile. In addition, there was an energy field around it which extended another quarter mile beyond the sphere's surface. This fact was quickly but expensively ascertained when two stealth fighters disintegrated as they impacted against the field at mach 2. The ship showed up on radar, but not the energy field. The names of the flight crews were, as the people were relating these happenings to me, being engraved on Half-Dome in Yosemite.

The ship was hovering over what was, technically, Hovenweep National Monument, a desolate grouping of Anasazi ruins of no known interest except to archaeologists and other strange people drawn to desert ruins. The ship's altitude was about one thousand feet, and so it cast a mighty shadow over the usually baking landscape.

Now, you must picture this scene. Here I am, charred to a veritable Cajun blackness, lying on the floor of my room examining a yellow portal visible in my thumb nail. A group of no less than a dozen people come barging in excitedly to tell me of the recent events, and proceed to do so without any apparent regard for my horrible old condition. They then proceed to stand there, waiting for me to say

something. As I mentioned, I had no lips at this point, and so was unable to make any but the most pathetic sort of noises. My friends were not daunted, though, and proceeded to debate among themselves just what I was trying to say. One fat man with greasy long hair, and wearing a Bob Marley T-shirt opined that my reaction was to quote a line of Sylvia Plath: "Her blacks crackle and drag." A nun of Sister Theresa's order disagreed, maintaining that I had said that the black ship was an omen of Christ's second coming (Behind her, a gaunt man with an eye patch, hat, and cane, and carrying a thick blue book with gold lettering under his arm, looked up and opened his umbrella.)

In fact, what I had tried to say was, "Does anyone have some aloe vera gel?", but this was not one of the possible interpretations for my noises which were being considered at the time.

While this discussion was proceeding, a young girl, aged perhaps six, worked her way through the crowd and approached me. She wore an enigmatic smile which seemed out of place, considering she was in close proximity to what was, for all practical purposes, an incinerated corpse. Regarding me in a silent but intense way, I eventually did see some tears well up in her eyes, which gave me hope that someone finally had noticed me, had seen what had happened to me.

She was holding a glass of water, and after staring at me for several minutes, proceeded to pour the water onto my face. Believe it or not, I actually could hear the hissing sound that water makes when it is poured onto hot coals, and wisps of steam began to curl in the air within my cone of vision. At this sound, the people in the room stopped debating my comments and speculating as to the meaning of the events now transpiring in the desert, and turned to look at me again. After several seconds of silence, accompanied by a sudden blanching of nearly all the faces I saw, more than one of the women in the group screamed, and a violent surge towards the door demonstrated the unity of horror which had seized them. They were gone in a trice, and I returned my attention to the little girl now standing over me with an empty water glass. Only now, snakes began to grow from her hair, and her face became the more sharply etched visage of a middle aged woman, one of incredible beauty. She stood over me removing her clothes, and once she was perfectly naked, she lowered herself down to the floor and began to embrace the cinder that was my body, kissing my hideous, lipless mouth and thrusting her

tongue almost down my throat. At this point I again lost consciousness and it is impossible for me to decide if I should say fortunately, or unfortunately.

Another passage of time, and now I was inside a giant sphere. Somehow I knew that it was the ship that I had just been told of. I was suspended in the center of this majestic sphere, which from the inside was all light. I could only barely discern the walls, which seemed to be very far away, for in the glare of the brightness, almost nothing could really be discerned. Presently I saw a figure approach, stepping on a golden walkway which seemed to form as he needed it. I say "he", but in truth the sex of the person was impossible to tell, or rather, the person seemed to embody the characteristics of both sexes. The long hair that flowed in light brown tresses from "its" ("their"?) head parted to reveal a face of perfect beauty, as if made from an average of all human male and female faces, containing all, yet being the hidden fulfillment of all. A garment of white covered the body, and the outlines could have been either male or female, partaking simultaneously of the angularity of one and the sinuousness of the other.

At a loss, I ventured to say "hello." Instantly, the figure in front of me changed into that of the young Indian I had recently seen in the desert, receiving the stone necklace from the coyote. In fact, I noticed the very same necklace now around his neck. Apparently, he saw that I recognized him, for he smiled, saying, "It seems you know me, and you look at my necklace as if it were familiar. My name is Ouami, and I am a facet of the being that stands before you. Your greeting elicited the part of me that you have come into contact with before to manifest itself. When I lived on this earth, I was the chief of a people who lived for a time directly under where our ship is now. There came a time, however, when we had to leave, but as we set out upon our journey, this ship descended and abducted all my people, not just my own group, and took us away to another planet within the galaxy. We were to become the seeds for a new type of being, one that would combine several incarnational personalities, melding them into a whole that was greater than the sum of its parts. Now we have returned to reveal ourselves, and to offer the same opportunity to your people."

I listened carefully to this somewhat bizarre scenario, and while I did the question of what the hell I was doing there came to mind. I looked down at my hands, which I expected to be charred stumps, but was pleasantly surprised to see them in their

familiar fleshy aspect, and indeed I seemed to be my old, pre-flambe self again. My eyes lit up, and I looked up expectantly at Ouami.

His countenance darkened, however, and he cast his eyes down. "Your bodily condition has not, I regret, been changed. Here you exist in your light body, which follows the ideal form. The combustion to which you were subjected has not been undone, indeed it cannot be undone, and as soon as you return from this ship, you will find yourself in the same condition. I am sorry."

Naturally, this was not welcome news. "Can't anything be done?" I asked, almost pathetically.

"No, I am afraid not." he replied sadly. "This is not due to limitations in our powers, but necessities in our plans. Your unfortunate predicament is a very necessary part of our unfolding intentions, and I'm afraid to say you must grin and bear it."

"I can't grin, I have no lips." I offered, as an attempt at humor. No smile was forthcoming from Ouami. "Why is it necessary, what part do I have to play in your plans?"

"It is not necessary for you to know in advance. In fact, it might interfere with the consummation of your duties. We know that you will, if left to yourself, do exactly what we want you to do. All I can do is assure you of the importance of your contribution to this endeavor, and beg your cooperation. You were brought to this ship to reassure you before your trials resume. You were selected because of certain proclivities and talents you possess which render you qualified."

I was not overly pleased by this speech. I did not particularly want to be part of his, or their, plans, especially if it required me to be incinerated. I assumed however, that since there was something I was expected to do, my conflagration would not be fatal. There was so much I wanted to ask, but before I could formulate my questions, the scene began to fade, and I suspected that I would soon be back in my cinder body.

Chapter Two

As I began to regain consciousness, the first thing I felt was a sense of motion. I could not open my eyes (that is, if I had any) but I could hear several voices:

"Give me another bandage."

"Here. God, what a stench."

"Be careful, he might be able to hear."

"I doubt it. He doesn't seem conscious. What the hell happened to him? Did he douse himself with gasoline, or something?"

"Don't know. We found him like this on the floor. Funny thing was, nothing else was burned in the room. Even the carpet under him wasn't burned. How could that happen?"

"Beats me. Hand me that syringe."

It dawned on me that I was in an ambulance, and the EMS crew was attending to me on the way to the hospital. I could not move or speak, so they assumed that I was unconscious. I could not feel anything except that singular numbness of corporeal awareness, the slight rocking motion of the ambulance, and a vague sense of busyness around me.

"He has third degree burns over his whole body. How is he even still alive?"

"I don't understand it. Hand me those forceps. Did you take his vital signs?"

"That's what's so spooky. His heart rate is normal, blood pressure normal, even his eyes respond to light. I don't know how it is that his eyes were not burned. Most of his face is gone. He has no lips at all."

"Having no lips is the least of his problems."

God, I wanted to laugh!

"Alright, here we are. Open the doors."

I remember an endless series of manipulations, immersions in baths and applications of sundry ointments, skin grafts from unknown donors of all shades, injections and bandaging. During all this, I was in and out of consciousness, half dreaming, but always feeling no pain. I was taken to be in a coma, and was hooked up to respirators and monitors, and finally seemed to be mostly left in one place. Gradually I began to feel more solidly in my body, and eventually I opened my eyes.

This innocent act provoked a great commotion around me, as I heard nurses running everywhere.

"Esmerelda! He's awake. Call Dr. Rausch"

"Madre de Dios! The poor dear."

A beautiful Filipino face approached mine, smiling and with a look of amazement.

"Welcome back Mr. Zot. Can you hear me? Blink if you can hear me."

I sent nerve impulses to my eyelids, and my vision was briefly blacked out, so I assumed that my attempt at blinking was successful.

Oh! Esmerelda, he can hear me! Don't you worry, Mr. Zot, everything's going to be O.K. You know, you're famous. You were in all the papers. Nobody can figure out what happened to you. It's been a big mystery. Can you speak?"

I tried to speak.

"I... don't...know."

"Yes you can, you can! Don't strain yourself now, wait until the doctor gets here. Oh, it's so good to see you coming around."

The beautiful face disappeared, and nothing happened for several minutes, although I could hear a commotion outside my room. Eventually, a group rushed in.

An older man with gray, shiny hair approached, and spoke first with a heavy Texas accent. Behind him were several other men in white coats, and the now familiar Filipino face that entranced me with its beauty.

"Well, Mr. Zot, I'm glad you could join us. My name is Dr. Rausch. You've caused a lot of commotion, what with your mysterious accident and your miraculous recovery. Not many people thought you would make it, and no one would have imagined that you would recover to this extent. Yet here you are, awake and talking. How do you feel? Could you tell me?"

The faces beamed expectantly as they awaited my reply.

"Well... I've...been...better."

I tried to smile, and felt a mighty stiffness around my mouth. I was not surprised by this, but suddenly I remembered that, after the accident, I had had no lips, so I wondered how I could smile at all. I lifted my hand to my face and felt around. Sure enough, it felt almost normal.

Now I must have looked astonished, for the group exchanged significant glances. This time, a younger man, also in hospital whites with pendant stethoscope, spoke excitedly.

"It's completely unbelievable, but your tissue has regenerated. We began by giving you skin grafts, but your condition was so bad that they were not taking. We were starting to despair when we noticed that your own skin was growing back at an astonishing rate. We stopped the grafts, and in no time you were covered with healthy tissue. Not scar tissue, but normal, healthy tissue! It was unbelievable!"

He could barely contain his excitement. He was like an eight year old who had just seen an ant pop from focused sunlight under a magnifying glass for the first time. He was almost jumping up and down.

By this time, Dr. Raush was examining me with various implements and making satisfied grunts under his breath. He seemed like someone who had just closed a killer business deal, and was looking forward to a new BMW. Esmerelda was fussing with the curtain and whispering to another nurse who giggled softly. I

heard only a few words of what they were saying: "grew back", "even that?", "enormous!", "wow!"

I also noticed, behind the group of doctors, and also in the hall, other men in suits and also policemen. The one with the most presence was an older balding man in a gray suit who was quietly watching me from the doorway. He did not pay any attention to what the doctors or nurses were doing, just watching me. Next to him was a younger man writing in a small notebook. He kept licking the tip of the pen he was writing with, and as he did I could see an ink blot on his tongue. I found this slightly disturbing, but my attention was drawn back to the doctors around me, and Dr. Rauch was asking me something.

"Mr. Zot, are you with us? Can you tell us what happened?

Could I tell them what happened. What had happened? I let myself go back, to what was my last memory. I remembered changing my guitar strings, sipping split pea soup, and then I remembered the voices in the ambulance. No, there was something in between, like a blur or a smudge of paint that swirled many colors together. If I could get closer to the smudge, maybe I could see what was in it. It seemed that it was important, I wanted to see what was in it, but right now all it was was a smudge of colors, sort of swirling around. Guitar strings, a smudge, and here I was.

The were waiting expectantly for an answer, they all looked like they would faint from holding their breath if I didn't say something soon. It was sort of comical, the pregnant silence in the room, and I felt like this was not the first time a group of people had awaited my words with such concentrated anticipation, but I could not place why I felt that way. I spoke quietly, but the words were coming out more easily now.

"I was in my room...changing my guitar string...cut my finger..."

They hung on every word, waiting for the punch line. I was staring at my finger, the one that I remembered being punctured by the metal of the string. It was my thumb, and as I gazed intently at it, as if it would tell me what to say next, I began to see images in the nail, some yellow, some red, or blue. I was hypnotized by them and no longer was aware of anything else. A patch of yellow, in particular, floated

to the front and began to approach me. Or rather, I began to be drawn into it, for I felt that I was leaving the "real" world more and more behind, and entering into what I can only describe as a yellow enigma.

Chapter three

A rusty knight riding at full tilt on a yellow charger, brandishing a guitar. (A RebelYella Fender Strat, of course) Coming from the sky, I hear the words:

"Still the waters,
blown the heavens.
Black the daughter,
wordless ever."

The sun blazes with a lemony hue. The earth is covered with buttercups and golden trees. Not autumn gold, but metallic gold covering the bark, like they had been gold leafed. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. The bite of lemons twisted my nostrils and I felt my flaxen hair shudder. Lymph pools gathered in my eyes, ran down my cheeks and, changing into yellow jackets, buzzed away angrily. E flat major.

I lay back in the flowers. "So this is what entropy is like," I thought to myself. I took a nap. I woke up and ate a light supper of summer squash and saffron rice, washing it down with lemonade. Around me, cowardly lawyers took notes on yellow legal pads. My pocket knife flipped open and shut, open and shut in my pocket. I was cut only slightly.

In the distance, I saw her approaching. She took her sweet time. By the time she reached me, tendrils had embraced my legs and my knees were numb from lack of circulation. I chided her on her languors. I tisked.

Her long hair was very blonde. She was about nine years old and smiled a virginal smile of trusting friendliness. Grown women cannot smile that way any longer, cannot trust that way any more. I shed a tear.

She held a small golden cube, which she tossed into the air in front of me, where it hung and spun without any visible means of support. A soft humming descended around me, and crop circles appeared in the grass. I smiled back.

"Hello," I said.

Her eyes twinkled.

"You're silly," she blurted out.

"I am not."

"Yes you are."

"No, I'm not."

"Uh-huh."

"Nope."

She stuck her tongue out at me. It too, had an ink blot on it, but it was, of course, yellow ink.

"Why don't you get up out of the flowers, silly?"

"I can't, the tendrils have spoken."

She looked down at my legs and, seeing the creepers holding them, giggled and snapped her fingers. Immediately, the creepers withdrew into the earth.

"Thank you," I said, getting to my feet and brushing the golden hay from my pants.
"Who are you that you can command the plants of the earth?"

She giggled again and pinched my arm. "You know."

"No I don't."

"Yes you do."

"No, I don't."

She paused and looked at me sideways, trying to figure out if I was serious, or if I was playing. Then she blew a raspberry at me and pinched my leg, hard.

"Ouch!"

"That's for being silly, silly!"

Her lips turned upwards at the corners, and downwards, simultaneously.

"Come on." she said, "It's time to go."

"Where are we going?"

"You know, silly." she giggled.

She took my hand and the golden landscape around us disappeared.

I was driving in a car by a volcanic crater. Beside me sat a young Asian woman, with long straight hair, wearing sunglasses. On the car radio was a language lesson: "Olaawakii. The Hawaiian word for coverlet." Then a child's voice, repeating, "The Hawaiian word for coverlet is Olaawakii." I stopped the car and we got out and walked the short distance to the crater. Steam rose from numerous vents all across the expanse, which must have stretched a mile or more. There was a faint smell of sulphur in the air. By some of the vents from which steam was rising I could see offerings of gin and fish left by Pele's worshipers. Overhead, huge black cloud masses rolled and rolled, and a warm wind blew our hair around our faces.

I turned to the woman and noticed tears streaming from below her sunglasses. We embraced, and the steam rose from the vents and flowed into the grey sky.

I sat in a blue tent, soft light filtering through the sides. Overhead, a loon's piercing cry slowly arrived from a distance, then faded away again into one. Sounds of dripping water. I felt sleepy, so I lay down on my sleeping bag, which only occupied a small portion of the tent floor, which clearly slept at least five. Outside, the tide was going out, way out, exposing a broad swath of barnacle-covered rocks. Rubbery red sea weeds would be draped over the rocks, here and there.

I sighed, as the silence of the place took me and fell into a light sleep.

Then I woke up, or at least that is what I assumed had happened, for generally when one is conscious, he or she is bound to find that they are awake. At least this

had been my experience up to that point. This time, I felt awake, but I also felt different. We are all familiar with being awake, and also with the dream state. When we sleep beyond dreams, we are not aware at all, at least not with our surface consciousness, but these three states are certainly familiar to us.

Awaking that day in the tent, I knew immediately and without question that I was in a different state of consciousness, one that I had never experienced before, and I was terrified. The "unknownness" of this state overwhelmed me, and I was beside myself. Literally. It seemed at one moment that I was bumping around inside the tent, then suddenly I would be on the floor again. I wondered where my guitar was, even though I knew full well that it was 3000 miles away in New York City.

I had a distinct impression that there was someone outside the tent, and I tried to call out, but the words turned to liquid pain in my throat and spilled out of the front of my neck. Finally, I produced a garbled "Who's there?", and immediately came a very calm reply from right outside the tent, "It's John."

I struggled to the front of the tent, and tried to go through the opening, but as soon as I was outside I felt even more disoriented. I could not raise my eyes to see above the ground, as if the upper lids of my eyes were dragging downwards. Afraid of becoming lost, I quickly went back inside. I knew, or it seemed certain to me, that if I could only go to sleep, I would escape this terrible zone where angles were askew under the filtered blue light.

I lay back down on the sleeping bag to do just that, but instead I simply opened my eyes and "woke up". There was no break of continuity between where I was before and where I was now, my eyes had simply opened, and normal waking had been reattained. I immediately sat up and chain-smoked a pack of Marlboros, while I looked out of the tent at the green forest dripping with rain.

I held the hand of a woman, one with medium length dark hair that swept around a face of Venus herself. She wore a billowy skirt and had several extraordinary necklaces circling her, of jasper, lapis, amber, and untold other treasures. Her flowing smile bathed me in a sweetness like nothing I had ever felt before, so that I knew at once that her and I had planned this meeting a long time before, and it was

now time to get down to business. What that business might have been, of course I had no idea at that time.

We seemed to be in an industrial loft, but one converted to living space, like so many in lower Manhattan. Sun shone in through the ten foot windows, and spread out on walls covered with backdrops from old opera productions. In the corner, two cats fought in a whirlwind, with dander flying everywhere.

"Another glass of wine?" she asked, with a definite glint in her eye.

"Sure." I said, and lit another cigarette.

As she poured the blood red wine into my glass, I saw that her hands were flames. A ring on her finger melted, and the liquid gold flowed onto the starched white table cloth. A small stone, a garnet, I think, bounced and rolled onto the floor. Everywhere there was music, "Les Nuits D'Ete" by Berlioz.

I leaned back and sighed, watching the smoke ring that I had just emitted slowly drift into the shape of a spiral galaxy, then twist suddenly as a draft caught it and float away in a hundred directions.

"So many galaxies, so many planets, so much life." I thought to myself, although I noticed at once that the thought was vapid.

Across from me, the woman had her elbow on the table and was leaning her chin on her hand. She eyed me quizzically.

"What is it?" she asked.

I drank my wine in one draught, and felt it burn into my stomach.

"What am I doing here?" I said, half rhetorically.

She smiled. "You know."

I searched for signs on her face which would tell me if she really thought I knew, or was just being coy. There were none.

She got up and went into another room. I waited and smoked.

In a few minutes she called for me to go to her.

I went through the door into the bedroom. She sat upon the bed, naked except for all her necklaces, which draped between, over, and around her breasts. She was holding a rectangular wooden box, and she opened it. Inside were small jars holding various colors, and a brush. She handed me the box with a smile and lay back on the bed, stretching her hands over her head and arching her back. She purred like a panther. Then she relaxed and lay quite still.

I opened the jar of red paint and using the brush, I began to paint a wavy line on her left leg. It began by her hip and flowed down to her ankle. I painted a similar line on her right leg, in yellow. I interrupted my inscriptions to kiss her toes, which at the time seemed the greatest honor that could befall a mortal man. When I was through I painted a bright red dot, crucifixion-style on each instep. "This is Thy Body."

Next, I painted a red gash under her right breast. "This is where, presently, water, blood, semen, wine and milk shall flow forth. Aristotle believed women turned a man's semen into blood for their own use, the excess becoming menstrual fluid."

"What the fuck did he know? Shut up and paint."

"Avec le plaisir d'un roi."

To match the red slit under the one breast, I mirrored it with a yellow one under the other. "This is where prana enters and exits." I did not place any marks upon her breasts. They were already perfect.

She smiled. Then she said, like she had memorized it last week and had been practicing since then:

This joining pertains

All.

Not wept, even

solemn -

anointed,

our beauty.

We sought

us,

now we are

this.

We beckon to

ourselves

to become

this.

Now.

Chapter Four

Coasting up the entrance ramp, I reached for a cig. The sun beat furiously on the visor and melted through it, scorching my eyes. The simple fact was: I was free.

That morning, I had left all my worldly belongings in my friend's garage and loaded up two pairs of underwear into my battered blue Mustang. He laughed at me with the kind of eyes that showed equal measures of scorn and jealousy. He didn't say, "What about your future, your career?", but as his two children ran in and out of the front door, screaming at the top of their lungs, he was clearly torn between sharing my excitement and reasserting his responsibilities, which seemed to weigh heavily on him. I told him that I had given notice at the conservatory, told my students to find another teacher, and told my landlord to fuck off.

The fact was, I had had some pretty strange dreams the night before last, and felt like I had to hit the road. I was having post-dream olfactory hallucinations of burnt flesh, and had a strong impulse to revisit the desert.

Two pairs of underwear, my guitar, and Pee Wee, my fat orange cat. And a pack of cigs. I pulled out of his driveway and felt like I had left the world and had entered the universe.

Now, Pee Wee was munching some tuna in the back seat and the radio was blaring the words of the late great Kurt Cobain: "I'm so happy, 'cause today I found my friends, here in my head". I saw my friends along the side of the road, in other cars, under the ground. Overhead, the air was full of kites: red ones, green ones, with long tails, painted with Japanese faces and whipping in the strong breeze. I turned onto the highway and engaged the afterburners. The engine groaned as I accelerated to 70 in the left lane. Tossing the spent cig out the window, I saw it injected back into the past, to join the many loose ends that flapped behind me so noisily.

Go West young man. And so I did. Passing the Denny's, I thought of waffles with ice cream, but did not stop. There was no time to lose, because I had all of time before me. Plenty of opportunities for waffles, plenty of nights for sex, plenty of

notes to come out of my guitar. Only first, I had to put some distance between myself and the past, between my present and the thousand demons that yelped and hollered behind me, spitting blood. I had escaped their clutches, or so I thought.

Pee Wee climbed over the back of the seat and stood up, putting his front paws on the dashboard so he could see out the windshield. I thought I saw a gleam in his eye, as he licked his chops. He was a good boy, much given to sleeping, eating and playing. I had learned a lot from him, but not nearly enough. Now he would really teach me. I reached over and massaged the scruff of his neck, and he turned to look at me.

"Do you have any idea of where we're going?" he said.

I laughed, and glanced out at the white lines rushing by "Nope."

He laughed, and sniffed the dashboard, as if there was something in its aroma that would answer his question. I passed a semi that seemed twelve blocks long. The driver looked down from his high cab and picked his nose. I left him in the dust.

As I pulled into the station to get some gas, I saw a red sports car stopped at the pump. A delicious blond in jeans and a tight, repeat, tight leotard top was inserting the nozzle into her tank. I smiled at her and she returned the smile. She took off her sunglasses to get a better look at Pee Wee on the front seat.

"That's one fat cat you got there", she remarked with a little laugh that caused my blood pressure to rise slightly. "He's not fat, he's just got big bones." Now she really laughed and the sunlight glinted off her teeth in a way that made everything I had ever suffered in my life seem worthwhile. She finished filling her tank first, and went in to pay.

I looked at Pee Wee and said "God is great."

He snickered, "Why, 'cause he gave you hormones?"

"You're just jealous 'cause your balls were cut off long ago."

He yawned and lay down to take a nap. The goddess came out and got into her car.

"Bye", she said accompanied by another dazzling smile. "Drive carefully now," I retorted, wittily I thought. She pulled out of the station, and out of my life, leaving me thinking about all the goddesses that would never know my caresses, and whether that was their tragedy, or mine.

As I paid for the gas, I glanced inside my wallet at the crisp bills I had taken out of the bank that morning. Although my bank had cash machines everywhere in the world, or so they claimed, it seemed that leaving my money with them and getting some whenever I needed it would be too much like remaining in the prison I had so impetuously released myself from. So I took it all out, hiding it in various places on my person and in the car. I knew it was much more risky this way, But, hey, what's one more risk on top of all the others I was taking? I put my trust in the Lord. Had He ever let me down? Nope. I had let myself down plenty, but He never did.

Back on the highway. Pee Wee is lying on his back on the front seat, like a dog. I start to think about where I'm going. It's time to visit the desert, the traditional place of introspection and cleansing. Where should I go: Canyonlands, Hovenweep, Monument Valley? I'll figure it out when I get there. Meanwhile, just point the vehicle towards that blood red setting sun and press the pedal. Pee Wee yawns again. He does that a lot, and I wonder if it's boredom or satori.

Soon I'm getting thirsty, and a sleazy roadhouse beckons. The half broken sign says "Ed's Palace", and underneath is a big painted burger and a mug of beer. No icon of Krishna or Jesus ever looked as real and meaningful as this masterpiece of American fulfillment. There were a few pickups and broken down cars parked in the dust, and I pulled in around the back, out of the sun.

"OK. Pee, now behave yourself." I poured some spring water into his dish, left the windows open a crack and got out.

He looked at me like "Where the hell are you going?" but I payed him no mind. You can't let the local fauna run your life.

It was so dark inside that I couldn't see at first, but at least the bar was lit and I made my way to a stool.

"What can I git ya?" The bartender was about three hundred pounds, and his arms were covered in tatoos.

"A cold one. What's on tap?"

"Bud."

"O.K. Can I get some food too?"

"Sorry, the kitchen's not open yet."

That was a disappointment, after seeing the burger icon outside, but at least I didn't have to risk food poisoning. The beer was icy, and it hit my throat like the promised land. I lit a cig and felt whole. It's always at moments like these that I feel at peace with myself and the world. Always when traveling, with a moment's pause to consider the road ahead and the road behind. Time stands still and the past and future are mere possibilities to be mused over, not reality to be dealt with. The present burns cleanly, like a gas flame.

All the lines of the universe seemed to intersect at Ed's Palace, and the Bodhisattva behind the bar looked at me mischievously from his standpoint in eternity. "Where ya headed?"

"West." He waited for elaboration. "I'm going to hang out in the desert for awhile. Collect my thoughts."

"Hmm. That's sure the place to do it. Me and my boys used to go out into the bluffs and drop acid. Shoot beer bottles with shotguns. Heh Heh heh." He wiped his nose with the rag he had just wiped the bar with. I began to be glad the kitchen wasn't open.

As my eyes slowly became accustomed to the dimness, I took stock of the situation. A couple of good ol' boys playing pool in the corner. A broken down alky sitting at the end of the bar. Every bar has an ancient alky sitting at the end, growing into the seat. If you're near a port, it's and old sailor, long past his final voyage. If you're in Alaska, it's an Indian, canned his last salmon long ago. In the mountains, its an old logger, sitting on a stool made of wood he chopped down decades ago. Usually they get a steady and free supply of beers from the

establishment, as if they were holy shrines to be made offerings to. Without their blessing, the joint might close or burn down. They were good luck charms. Sometimes, If they weren't too broken down, they functioned as bouncers in exchange for their beer. Usually, they just sat. This one looked like a steel worker, with big arms that used to be muscle, but were now beer soaked flab. His face was so red and so covered with veins that he looked like a victim of an atomic blast. I guess he was, in a way. He looked at me and nodded his head slightly. I lifted my mug to him and drank deep. The universe was O.K., and we knew it.

She came up behind me, so I didn't see her until she was right in my face. She was another kind of fixture in this kind of place, a stop along the trucker's byways. I could see right away how many nights she had spent in truck's cabs in rest stops from coast to coast. Maybe when she was younger, she had hopes. Hopes of being treated decently, of finding a life. But with the passing years and passing truckers, she was reduced to hoping that she would be noticed at all, that anyone would pay her some attention. The scraggly hair, bleached into the consistency of dirty straw, the missing front tooth (I wondered if she remembered the name of the bastard who had done that to her), the slightly pendulous breasts, the midriff that was only a roll of fat; her medals of pathetic valor. Nevertheless I saw that she, too was a goddess, albeit one that I wouldn't touch with a ten foot pole.

"Hi, honey. Which way ya going?" she said as she plopped onto the barstool next to me and set down a half glass of beer. Her cigarette was covered with lipstick, as was the rim of the glass. She had on way too much makeup, and badly applied at that.

" Headin' West, towards the desert."

"Whatcha gonna do there?"

"Hang out"

She took a swig, inhaled deeply and let the smoke out in a jet that looked like a dragons' breath. "Hang out? And do what?"

"I don't know. I just know that's where I'm going."

"Well, I'm trying to get to Durango. Can you give me a lift?" She looked at me with eyes and a smile that promised much, but only as a way of getting what she wanted. I wondered if she knew what she wanted.

I took a swig, inhaled deep and let out the smoke like puffs from a whistle on a locomotive. "Are you allergic to cats? I got a cat in the car."

"Aw, no." She whined, "I love cats."

I think she figured that since I was a cat man I probably wouldn't rape her, beat the shit out of her and leave her in a ditch by the road. Somehow, I had the feeling she was all too familiar with that scenario. I finished my beer and set it down with a thud.

"Well, come on if your coming." I got up. She drained her mug and grabbed her purse. It looked like she had either gotten it in a thrift shop, or she had had it long enough for it to look like she had just gotten it in a thrift shop. The bartender looked at me with a sneer. The old alky smiled.

I held the door for her "After you." She looked at me like she was in shock.

At the car, Pee Wee eyed her suspiciously and immediately dove into the back seat, burying himself under some newspapers. "Oh, he's cute, what a big cat. My name's Helen."

"Call me Zot."

"Zot? what kinda name is that?" she wrinkled her nose. "I dunno. That's what they call me." We got in and she immediately pulled down the visor to look at herself in the mirror. She was fussing with her hair, which seemed a little like whipping a dead horse. I thought to myself 'Is this the face that launched a thousand ships?'

"I'm goin' to Durango to visit my girlfriend. She said she could get me a job doing nails at the beauty parlor where she works. It don't sound too great to me, but a girl's got to make a living, ya know?" I let that one go, but we both knew we were both thinking about other ways that some girls make a living. But who am I to judge. Is playing guitar in a restaurant for a bunch of snobby frenchmen any less of

a prostitution? I think not. It's part of the reason that I was there on the road, just like her.

We got under way, and as the fresh air whipped through the car, we both felt good. She was actually more of a master of this kind of life, and this feeling, than I was. I gained a new respect for her as I contemplated her devotion to freedom, however painful it was for her.

"Are you from around here?" I asked.

"No, I'm from back east. Newport.

"Oh, yeah? I'm from New York City, originally."

She smiled. "I thought so. You seemed different from the locals."

"Is that good or bad."

She looked at me for a minute, "It just is. How'd you end up out here?"

"I'm a musician, and I got a job teaching at the conservatory."

"Oh, I've been there. I saw a concert, once. A string quartet,. They played Beethoven, I think."

Now I really looked at her. The last thing I ever expected to hear coming from her mouth were words like "string quartet" and "Beethoven".

"What do you play?" she asked.

"Guitar," and I jerked my thumb towards the back seat, where a guitar case was lying. "Classical, flamenco, blues, whatever."

"Wow. I'd love to hear you play."

"Maybe later."

We were quiet for a while we both watched the scenery go by. We weren't far enough west yet for any of the scenery to be worth looking at, but there were the other cars, roadside restaurants and businesses. Sometimes houses and farms, so

close to the highway that I wondered how the people could stand the sound and proximity of the traffic. Then I remembered that when I lived in New York, I had lived right on Third Avenue. Talk about constant traffic. How in the world did I ever put up with it? Time numbs all sounds, as well as our ears and brains.

"You grew up in Newport?"

"Yeah. It was nice, but I couldn't wait to leave. As soon as I was sixteen, me and my boyfriend split. We went to Kentucky, and then he dumped me. I've just been traveling back and forth ever since. Real Jack Kerouac stuff." Oh, so now it was Kerouac as well as Beethoven.

"How long ago was that?" I didn't want to ask 'How old are you', thinking it a bit rude.

"Ten, no eleven years ago"

I was shocked. She was, therefore, twenty seven, but she looked forty. Her life must have been even harder than I thought, to take that kind of toll on her. I saw her again in a new light, the third or fourth since I had met her.

"So is school over? Are you goin' out west for a vacation?" she lit another cigarette.

I sighed. "Nope, I quit."

"What for?"

"I'm not really sure myself. Just couldn't take it any more. I felt like I was becoming dead, and I didn't like the feeling. So I decided to chuck it all and head out. Besides, I had some weird dream, and it makes me feel like I gotta get to the desert."

She put her fist in the air and hollered, "Whoa! Call of the wild." Her eyes had a sparkle in them, "On the road again!" We both laughed.

She quieted down and said, "Well, it's not all that easy, or that nice, some of the time."

I felt like she was a more experienced teacher, offering me her wisdom. Was it a coincidence that she was sitting in my car. Is it ever?

After a couple of minutes, she asked, "What kinda dream?"

I didn't know exactly. I had only fleeting images and feelings, quick shots of the color yellow, a hospital room, a sphere, images of sexy women. It was like a music video, but with stronger aftertones.

"Hard to say. It was weird, I can't really remember it. I just know I gotta get to the desert."

"I have weird dreams all the time." She was looking at the nailpolish peeling off her fingernails.

After a polite pause, I asked, "Such as?"

I got the impression she wasn't sure if she wanted to tell me. Finally she said, "Last night I dreamt I was a little girl again. I was in a big field of yellow flowers, and I felt like I was about to meet someone important." She looked up at me and squinted slightly, as if to try and see me better.

As soon as she said this, I shuddered and an image of a little girl in a field of yellow flowers flashed through my mind. I knew that I too had seen that image, but I could not place it. Maybe in a movie.

"What's so weird about that?"

"Well, nuthin', except in the dream I could make the clouds move and the rain fall, I could make the plants grow, I felt like I could do anything."

"Sounds good to me." I looked over at her and smiled. It sounded like a projection of her wish to escape her powerlessness. Little did I know.

We continued in silence for a while, until I began to feel tired. I had been driving all day, and it was time for sleep. "I'm gonna have to rest. You mind if we check into a motel? We'll get a room with two beds." I didn't want her to think me presumptuous.

She snorted a little laugh. "Two beds, right." I guess she assumed that I wanted something in return for the lift.

We pulled into the parking lot of a nondescript motel like the ones that litter the highways. It would do as good as any. When the car stopped, Pee Wee poked his head up and looked around.

Helen started petting him. "What's his name again? You cutie pie." She scratched him under the chin, a sure-fire way of winning his life-long devotion.

"Pee-Wee," I said.

I turned off the engine and took the keys with me while I registered in the office. No use taking any chances, I hardly knew this babe.

We were in number 12, in the back. I pulled the car around, and we got out. I went to open the door so she could go in while I got the cat, my guitar and a bag or two. By the time I went in, she had the lights on and was sitting on one of the two beds.

"I thought you were kidding about the two beds." She sounded hurt, actually. Just like a women: damned if you do, damned if you don't.

"Nothing personal, I'm just beat." It was the truth, although now that I looked at her, she didn't look so bad. Some women grow on you; they don't look so attractive when you first see them, but after you talk to them and get a feeling for who they are, it seems to transform their appearance somewhat. She was one of those.

I had stopped and gotten some food and a couple of beers, and we ate this while we watched a little T.V. I gave Pee-Wee some catfood in his bowl, and some water in another, and he ate contentedly. Just one big happy family. Unfortunately, the news had a story about a body that had been found in whatever county it was we were in, back up in the woods. It was thought to be a prostitute who had been murdered.

Helen looked pale. She also scrutinized me a little more carefully. "The world's a crazy place," she commented. I could hardly disagree with her, "That's for sure." We finished our meal in silence.

Soon after, we turned in. I got into my bed, and as I quickly started passing out, I saw the light on in the bathroom and shadows of Helen moving about on the wall.

Sometime during the night, I felt a warm presence slide into bed beside me, and a gentle hand began moving over my body. Being a guy, I was very easily convinced.

Chapter Five

Ouami walked along the path to the village, Qalag's body slung over one shoulder. He didn't weigh very much: old men's bones become light. He carried Qalag's necklace tucked into his belt and he could feel its power far more than anything coming from the unmoving body on his shoulder.

After the coyote had gone away, Ouami had followed its tracks back to where he suspected Qalag's body would be. He knew that the old man was dead as soon as he saw the necklace in the coyote's jaws. So he was prepared in his mind when he found his grandfather's body and, after a moment of silently looking at him, gathered him up, and started back to the village.

As his village came into view, he could see Ala and Molia already watching him. They had been on the outskirts of the buildings grinding some grain and they spotted him as soon as he had climbed to the last highpoint before descending into their canyon. There was a longer way which didn't require climbing up and down, for it followed the winding canyon floor, but Ouami had taken the more direct path which cut off having to follow a whole loop of the canyon. It did not require strenuous climbing, but normally he would not take it if he was carrying anything heavy, let alone a body. He had not consciously chosen to take that path, but as he stood for a moment at the top before descending again into the canyon, he looked out over his village and the surrounding red landscape. The body of his grandfather almost floated on his shoulder and he said aloud to the old man, sure that somehow he could still hear him, "This is the time we have known would come. The other times we wondered if the time had arrived, but our wondering should have shown us that it was not yet time. Now that it has happened, there is no doubt in my mind."

While he was standing there, Ala looked up from her work and saw them silhouetted against the late afternoon sky. At first, the strange shape made by the two bodies together had startled her, and she wondered what spirit had chosen to stand there. Then she made out that it was a standing figure with a large sack over its shoulder with white flour flowing out of it. Then, instantaneously, she realized

that the “flowing flour” was hair, long silver hair, Qualag’s hair. Finally it all clicked in her mind, and she saw Ouami standing with Qualag’s body over his shoulder. A pang cut her heart, for she knew immediately that Olag was dead, but then her hopes and fears made her wonder if instead he might be only unconscious. Deep down, though, she knew. Beside her, Molia was still grinding away. Ala said, without taking her eyes off the figure, “Look sister.” Molia looked first at Ala, then in the direction of her eyes, and she saw at once what was happening.

Molia received more explicit information from spirits than Ala did. She had ever since they were children, and Ala could never win when they played hide and find in the rock crevices around the village. Molia always knew just where Ala was, and had only to walk to the spot to find her. Ala had to wander around at random, sometimes seemingly forever, hoping to find Molia’s hiding place. That was fine with Molia, for it gave her her only chance to be alone, without her parents and even without her sister. They were almost always together and it seemed that only when playing hide and find could they be apart for a while. Ala found it disquieting to be away from her sister, so she always tried to find Molia as quickly as possible. Without her sister at her side, or at least within her view, she felt empty and a little frightened. She could be away from her parents without these feelings, but her sister felt like part of her. So she would walk quickly along the canyon floors, glancing around corners and looking for possible hiding places. Molia on the other hand, would sometimes purposely go in the wrong direction, slowly walking down a side canyon, lost in her thoughts or just looking at the spirits in the canyon. She would do this for as long as she felt she could without taking too long to find Ala. She sensed that Ala would be getting uncomfortable waiting for her sister to find her. Ala never left her hiding place until Molia came along. She had done it once or twice long ago but Molia had gotten angry at her and made her promise to stay in her hiding place for as long as it took Molia to find her. Ala not only loved her sister, and missed her terribly, but she also respected and even feared her. So ever since she had made the promise she had never broken it.

When they were older, Molia always knew what Ala was thinking and feeling, so that they almost were her own thoughts and feelings. That was also why she needed time away from her sister. Molia loved Ala dearly, but her sister’s thoughts and feelings were sometimes either too much for her, or not enough. Ala’s

emotions changed rapidly almost all the time, so that feeling them was like a thunderstorm with lightning. Molia was much more stable. She enjoyed thunderstorms, but not all the time. And it wasn't even that when she was away from her sister she did not feel her at all, just that the intensity was turned down enough to make it quieter for her own thoughts and feelings. Molia sometimes worried that she did not have strong enough feelings, especially compared to Ala, her feelings always seemed lukewarm, so that even as she felt the need frequently to escape from her sister's intensity, she also envied her. For all her crazy feelings, Ala's soul was always richly active and Molia drew more sustenance from it than she dared to admit.

So while Ala saw the scene presented to physical sight, Molia saw much more. She saw Ouami's familiar aura, which at the moment showed more complex movements than usual. Olag's body over his shoulder only had the dim residual blue/grey aura that is the last to fade after someone dies. Some parts and colors disappear as soon as someone takes their last breath (she knew this from being present when her grandparents and other relatives had died), other layers fade soon after. But the blue/grey part of the aura that is very close to the body was always the last to go and sometimes was still there when people were put into the ground. None of this was really unusual, but what was happening around them was astonishing and Molia was transfixed.

Chapter Six

When I woke the next morning, my bed was again empty. For a second I couldn't tell if I had dreamed of love making, but then I heard Helen puttering in the bathroom and remembered the reality, although it still seemed dreamlike. In fact, it had been so amazing that I could not reconcile the experience with the ordinary world, and searched hard for a point of comparison. I could find none except for the image of flying over a landscape riddled with long, narrow lakes reflecting the setting sun so that they looked like slivers of a broken mirror. Flying over those lakes, I felt free.

As I pondered this, Helen emerged from the bathroom. When I saw her, I experienced a moment of dissociation, like when you wake up and for a second you don't know where you are. The reason for this was that the woman I saw before me was not the woman I had met the day before and had sex with during the night. Or rather, it was the same woman, but utterly transformed. Now, I'm not talking about the smile on a woman's face that she wears after being well-fucked, or the glow that accompanies this. I mean that her physical appearance was different. All the marks of wear, tear and hardship had somehow melted from her, and she appeared as a Helen who had perhaps lived a different life from the one I had met yesterday. How people look totally expresses who they are and how they have lived their lives. I don't mean that how they dress expresses this: it is in their physiognomy, their body shape and the way they hold themselves. As Blake said, the body is the part of the soul visible to the five senses. Helen's face, body and bearing now expressed a person who had known how to live happily whereas the day before she was more of a tortured soul, the kind that can easily become over involved with needles and opiates.

Of course, I had not really seen her undressed the night before, and when she had crawled into my bed the lights were out, but I know that the sleek, toned body I now saw was not the flabby one I remembered dressed in ill-fitting soiled clothes. Her hair too was smooth and shiny and far more so than being the simple result of a shower and shampoo. Her breasts, which I remembered looking somewhat pendulous even in the bra that I spied under her blouse, now stood firm and round

without any support. Instead of a roll of flab around her midsection there was a trim waist and a flat stomach that moved gently as she breathed.

But it was in her face most of all that I saw the transmutation. Of all the parts of the body, the face speaks most eloquently of the state of the soul. The eyes that looked at me were clear and strong, the complexion that yesterday was pockmarked and sallow was pink and radiant. Even her lips were fuller, as if her heart were pumping blood more strongly.

I probably looked somewhat dumbfounded, but she either did not notice or pretended not to notice. Her smile flashed white teeth and she asked “Did you sleep O.K?” She moved toward the dresser where her jewelry was, and as she stood with her back to me, contrapposto, her ass made a perfect double moon, so that I felt my rocket ship being refueled under the covers and rising on the launch pad. I swallowed hard, “Um....yup.” I stretched and tried to appear nonchalant. In fact, I was slowly realizing that the woman who stood before me was perhaps the most beautiful and amazing I had ever seen, so that it was as if someone had gone into my mind and found the archetypes of female forms that resided there, using them to create a flesh and blood woman following perfectly those ideal forms.

She had put on several bracelets and necklaces that I did not remember seeing the day before. They draped around her breasts and only served to further display their perfection. She slid on her panties and came over to sit on the edge of the bed. Holding her hair away from her face with one hand she bent over to kiss me on the lips. “Good morning,” she said, flashing those teeth again. “Morning,” I replied, in between kisses. I looked deep into her eyes and felt a jolt of energy which began at the end of my tailbone and flashed up my spine until it reached my head, where it enveloped my brain in bliss and then shot out of the top of my head. She put her head on my chest and I held her for a few minutes, both of us breathing quietly. As far as I recalled, no discursive thoughts passed through my mind during that time, but I had a clear image of a field of golden wheat and the buzzing of a multitude of bees wafting over it.

She got up suddenly, and went to where the rest of her clothes were. “I’m starved,” she said, not with the tiredness of hunger but with the energy that knows it needs replenishment to rise to even greater heights. “I think I remember a coffee shop

next to the motel office. Let's go there." "O.K.," I said, hauling myself out of bed, feeling so good that I could have sworn I had slept for days. As I dressed, Peewee came out from under the bed and look up at me with those eyes that said "When am I going to get some fucking food, huh?" "O.K. Pee," I said, and put some in his bowl. "You keep an eye on things while we are gone." Check-out time wasn't for another couple of hours, so we could leave our stuff in the room while we went to eat.

Walking to the coffee shop I couldn't decide if I should mention the transformation. In a way, I was afraid that the spell would be broken if I verbalized it, so I decided to remain silent and await further developments.

We sat in a booth and a waitress who looked more like the Helen of the day before brought us coffee. After a few sips, always a great relief to me, Helen looked at me with a mischievous twinkle in her eye, "You make love like you've been sleeping with 14 year old virgins." She giggled and sipped her coffee, looking for a reaction on my face. "Pffff....," I let out a derisive puff of air. Actually, I had just gotten out of a relationship with a grown woman who was precisely like a 14 year old virgin, both emotionally and sexually. "Sorry," I said, dejectedly with downcast eyes. The male ego is perhaps one of the most fragile substances in the universe, comparable to a bubble blown of spun glass. "Don't be sorry, you were great, just a little tentative. You give the best head ever!" In the next booth, a 300 pound trucker shoveling home fries into his mouth heard her, and stopped with the fork halfway between the plate and his mouth. From the look on his face, I would have guessed he had been gut-shot. "Uh....thanks," I finally managed to say. Although not exactly a master conversationalist, I usually was somewhat more eloquent. This chick had me flabbergasted though, and I had a hard time finding any words, let alone speaking them.

"Who are you?" I asked. "You know, silly," she replied with a giggle, reaching over and pinching my arm. A shiver went up my spine for there was something exceedingly familiar about her reply and the pinch. Just then our food arrived and that at least brought me back to reality.

While we ate, she talked about what we would do when we got to the desert. I looked at her quizzically and asked "I thought you were going to Durango to work

at a nail salon?" She said "Durango....," softly, her voice trailing off as if she had never heard of it before. Suddenly she broke off her reverie and spoke matter-of-factly, "Oh well, we've got things to do. You know that." and she went back to sprinkling pepper on her eggs.

After a minute or so of waiting for futher elucidation, I finally asked, "What do you mean?" She put down her fork and smiled, "What made you want to go to the desert in the first place?" "Well, when I've been there before I've always found it a good place for spiritual cleansing and thinking about things. I've got to figure out what I'm going to do now. I kinda impetuously ditched my whole life back there, and don't really know where or what I'm headed towards. She drank some coffee and put the cup down, "Well, that's what we're going to do then." I said "I guess I figured I'd be alone there to do some thinking." I thought I saw just a hint of a shadow pass over her features. "I won't be in the way, I can bring food to your magic circle while you hold your vigil." "Huh?" "You know, like the Native Americans do. You make a circle in the sand, consecrate it and stay in it for as long as necessary to receive a vision. Usually, you fast or go without water, but you know you don't do well fasting." I knit my brow. How could she possibly know that the couple of times I tried to fast and went a day without eating, the next day I was so weak I felt like I was dying and it was all I could do to drag myself out of bed and get to the kitchen to eat a piece of toast. "Besides," she continued, "fasting is no longer necessary due to the higher light frequencies that are present. It's much easier now to tune in." As she was saying this, she absent mindedly buttered a piece of toast like she was talking about what movie to see that night.