

Chapter Seventeen

"Hello, Job," I say brightly, as I clamber through the floor of the treehouse. Helpless is snuggled inside my shirt, and he wriggles free as soon as we arrive.

"Hello, Melody," he replies.

"I have a question for you," I say, settling in. "What do you know about something called ayahuasca?"

"Are you very interested, or only slightly interested?" replies Job. "I can give you varying levels of depth to the answer."

"Very interested," I say. "I think I'm taking some of it tomorrow."

A slight pause, and then Job pulses vibrantly, brilliant shades of blue and pink, and says, "Ayahuasca is a term originated by Quechua Indians in the Amazon jungle of South America. The word can be translated as 'vine of the souls' or 'vine of the dead.' The specific vine in question, *banisteriopsis caapi*, contains the hallucinogenic alkaloids harmine, which was once called telepathine, and harmaline. Ayahuasca is also the name of a psychoactive brew made by combining this vine with naturally occurring sources of dimethyltryptamine, or DMT, and other admixtures. It is used in various shamanic practices throughout the Amazon, and is said to be one of the more potent hallucinogenic experiences known to humanity. It is claimed that ayahuasca creates intense visionary experiences, allows incidents of group mind, enhances aural stimulation, and allows for certain applications of shamanic healing practices."

"Hallucinogenic, huh? Like what your buddies at InfiniTek were dosing me with?"

"The term 'hallucinogenic,' unfortunately, is rather unwieldy for communicating the various shades of experiential difference that exist among drugs in this category. The drugs you were given by InfiniTek were especially designed for you, calibrated for your specific body chemistry and psychological makeup. The hallucinations you experienced were in fact 'programmed' before hand, using sophisticated technology which only InfiniTek possesses. On the other hand, ayahuasca is comprised of naturally occurring compounds; the hallucinations and visions you experience there will be wholly the result of the natural reaction your brain has to the chemical, unmediated by an outside programmer."

"So I'd get my own hallucinations instead of someone else's."

"Indeed." Pause. "Ayahuasca has a long history of shamanic use, spanning thousands of years. DMT is the most active agent. When smoked, DMT produces an intense and overwhelming five to seven minute experience; when taken orally as ayahuasca, the experience is potentiated over a period of four hours and upwards."

"And what's going to happen to me when I take it?"

"If you are asking about the caliber of the experience, it is impossible to predict how your brain will react. If you are taking ayahuasca in the presence of an ayahuscero, you will have his or her guidance to ensure that you return from the experience relatively unscathed -- in theory. There is much speculative literature about the actual nature of the ayahuasca experience, but this of course seems to be beyond the realm of my experience entirely, and modern science does not acknowledge the validity of those claims. Ayahuasca is often considered in a 'mystical' context, which is inappropriate for science."

"I see." Pause. "So I'm gonna have a pretty freaky time tomorrow."

"Whatever has possessed you to try ayahuasca, may I ask?"

"Someone wants to heal me, that's all, and he thinks ayahuasca is a good idea."

"Do you think it's a good idea?"

"Well... I'm nervous, to say the least, but... something about the idea really appeals to me. I don't know. I'm probably being very naive. I know nothing about this, and it's probably dangerous, but... someday I wanna go skydiving too, and that's not exactly the safest hobby in the world."

"From what I can gather via my sources -- which, admittedly, tend toward the 'fringe' or 'alternative' point of view in Western culture -- the ayahuasca experience is highly regarded among those who typically enjoy this class of substances. I'm unable to discover any first person accounts from actual Indians, but I've accessed a number of first person accounts from Westerners who have tried ayahuasca, and many of them feel as though it is a profound experience. There are also, I should point out, numerous reports of negative experiences; this, apparently, is par for the course, as you can never know in advance how your brain is going to react."

"How come your sources tend toward the fringe?"

"My primary source of information on this subject is the global Internet, to which I am networked and of which I maintain full awareness

at every level. Although Western society has earmarked this class of experience -- the psychedelic experience, as it is most often called -- as taboo, there remains nonetheless a growing body of literature on the subject, much of which is online. The internal libraries provided me by InfiniTek are primarily technical in nature and do not, unfortunately, provide information on this topic."

Sigh... I'm about to become *taboo*.

"Yeah, well, I'll be sure to give you a first person account after this, and you can include it in your library if you want."

"Certainly."

"If I need to talk to you tomorrow, will you mind?"

"Of course not."

"Even if I'm totally fucked up on ayahuasca and don't make any sense?"

"I believe I will be understanding of your situation."

"That's cool. I think I've had enough negative experiences with hallucinogens. It's time to have a positive one and wipe that bad taste out of my mouth."

"This is going to taste quite awful," says Ramon, as he slowly prepares my dose of ayahuasca. He's pouring a thick, viscous black goo from a pot into a small cup. I can smell it from here, and it is incredibly nauseating, even at a distance. Dr. X is standing clear across the room, smiling, not wanting to get too close to the odor. "The extraction process I use is efficient but not perfect, so you will likely encounter small bits of bark and pulp. Don't worry; it's all edible, heh heh."

My hands are trembling slightly, but I want to look cool and composed.

"You use banisteriopsis caapi, right?" I ask, using the name of the vine Job gave me, trying to sound like I'm a pro. "That's the vine of the souls, right?"

Ramon's eyebrows raise visibly. Dr. X chuckles.

"Yes, in fact, it is," Ramon replies.

"And there are other plants in there which contain dimethyltryptamine?" I ask.

"Something I found growing under a rock, if you must know," he replies with a smile. "Someone's been studying all night, it seems."

"Nah," I reply, deciding to 'fess up. "I know the names but I don't know a damn thing about what they mean."

"You'll know shortly," says Dr. X.

"I don't know what they 'mean' either," Ramon tells me. "I don't know the 'meaning' of the DMT molecule or the 'meaning' behind the growth of the ayahuasca vine. I only know they *work*." As he stirs: "Many people come here from America without the slightest bit of awareness of why they've come. They think a medicine man is going to wear a grass skirt, and have a painted face, and chant and hang himself by steel hooks and make some sort of crazy spectacle out of tribal beliefs. Only a rare few come here for the actual healing experience, and even of those, many are not nearly as ready for the experience as you are."

"You're just trying to flatter me," I reply, "so I won't be nervous."

"You're right, of course," he says.

"You don't think you're making a spectacle out of tribal beliefs?" I ask. "I mean, sharing this stuff with the West, you don't think that's somehow stealing from the poor to feed the rich?"

"Who says the West is so rich?" he replies. "The West, if I may speak generally for a moment, is a den of iniquity without the common sense required to feed a dog, let alone support its population with wisdom and courage. The tribes who generated this knowledge have been in decline ever since the West first encountered them. It's fitting, then, to see even small numbers of Westerners finally coming to the conclusion that these ways are valuable." Handing me my cup: "Anyway, I customize it for the individuals. A full blown 'tribal trip' would hardly suit a Western mind. I do take certain liberties with the formalities. After all, it's the spirit of the thing that does the work, and not always the trappings."

Holding the cup in my hands, realizing that the moment is almost upon me.

"You better tell me what's going to happen to me," I say. "I've suddenly got a lot of apprehensions."

"Good," says Ramon. "If you *weren't* apprehensive, I'd say you didn't understand half of what is about to happen."

"There's going to be a fairly immediate physical reaction," says Dr. X. "It's not going to be pretty. Your body won't enjoy this mixture, and within the first forty-five minutes or so, you will undoubtedly vomit and probably empty your bowels as well--"

"Good fucking god!" I exclaim.

"After that, it should be a smooth ride, physically, leaving you to the actual body of the experience, which is likely to be fairly intense, as you can imagine."

"We're going to go outside to begin," says Ramon, "out in the clearing. It's nice to be able to see the trees, and the river, as we begin."

"I'm not in the mood to vomit," I say.

"I will be taking the ayahuasca as well, as you know. We will be companions of a sort on this journey, although inherently, you will be alone."

"What about you?" I ask Dr. X.

"I plan on staying out of your way," he says. "You don't need any passive observers around."

I stare at the black goo in front of me. Presumably, the goo is staring back.

"We're talking this thing to death," I say at last. "Let's just do it."

Ramon hands me a large glass of water to accompany my black goo. He holds the door to the hut open and says, "After you...."

The sky outside is murky gray, what I can see of it through the trees. Definitely looks like rain, maybe a big ol' thunderstorm will come crashing through. Ramon and I sit in a couple of lawn chairs, next to each other, staring at each other, feeling each other out maybe, probably just staring at each other really; and then, Ramon takes a sip of his goo, a big sip, probably swallows about half of it at once. He's got a brown stain on his lips, which he promptly wipes off onto his sleeve. I look down into my goo, my ayahuasca, wish to hell I couldn't smell it, and raise it to my lips. First sip into my mouth is

horrible, along the lines of some kind of sweetness turned acrid, as though a cheesecake was consumed by mold and turned into juice, except much more bitter than that, good *christ* I can hardly swallow the slightest sip, plant mass and chunks of this and that catching in my throat, the taste is like a rotten chocolate sauce filled with dirt and garlic, or perhaps more like a foul hunk of meat ground up into liquid and spiced with lemon and salt; my gag reflex attacks the goo, and it's all I can do to avoid spitting it out onto the ground. One sip.

Meanwhile, Ramon calmly finishes off his dose, washes it down with water.

Water, yes, thanks for reminding me, suck down half a cup full of water, but there is *no escaping* the residue of the taste which coats my mouth, and I have the rest of the cup to go. Quickly, quickly, quickly, take another sip, swallow, take another sip, swallow, moan out loud, roll the eyes, shudder cough and take a breath, feel the pulp in my teeth and the

thickness of the brew caught in the back of my throat, cough, shudder, quickly now, take another sip, you are nearly one eighth of the way through the glass, take a *bigger* sip, swallow, tears of disgust reaching my eyes, sweat pouring from my forehead from the exertion required to ingest this putrescent concoction, swallow, suck down water, good fucking god, swallow, finally, give it up, suck down all the rest of that god forsaken brew, lurch forward, prepare to--

"Do not vomit yet!" hisses Ramon. "Hold it in as long as you can!"

Catch the goo in my mouth and literally force it back down my throat, chewing it, swilling it, holding it in my stomach. Dizzy for a moment, struggle shudder slip and slide until composure is regained, lean back into my chair again, hold myself still, finish the last of my water and he hands me his, finish his as well and drop the glasses on the ground beside me. Now there is no goo left to drink, and the act of drinking no longer occupies my attention. Now I stare at Ramon with questions for eyeballs and wonder what comes next.

No answer, just a smile, looks like you got a little Buddha statue drunk and took it out carousing, and I'm, you know, just sitting here, really, with a cup of sickening goo wreaking havoc on my stomach. Bile rising in my throat but after a few minutes, I'm used to it; stomach acids boiling and bubbling, but I haven't reached the critical point yet. Meanwhile, I will stare into the trees, stare down the hill at the river that runs off in the distance, stare into the clouds at the burgeoning thunderstorm which is preparing to properly announce its presence, taking my hands and simply running them through my hair, taking out the tie and letting it dangle freely behind me, thick thick black hair, dirty from the jungle but still it's long and luscious how it hangs there, and I close my eyes, and comb my hair again and again with these hands of mine, until finally I decide I need to laugh, a good solid laugh, and Ramon decides to join me.

Silence falls again and there are birds all around us now, I'm becoming aware of chirping here and there in patterns and beautiful harmonies. Also, the insects seem to be leaving me alone, and for that, I am grateful. I'm feeling a certain tingling, now

goodness what a chill passed up my spine, some kind of ethereal wave of sweet sweet energy -- god, listen to me -- some kind of shiver of shimmering, scintillating color and light which starts at the base of my spine and travels all the way up to the occipital joint, where it suddenly

dissipates throughout my head, as though little bubbles of color are now escaping from my eyes the way bubbles escape from a bubble machine.

"I'm tingling," I say. "Is that supposed to happen?"

There's a familiarity to all of this; I recognize this now as a sort of approach to the experience, a kind of warming up of the body's hidden engines, a slow activation of the chakras one by one, only I am *not* experiencing the same fear I always experienced when being drugged by those who are my enemies. There's a kind of liberation in these moments, recognizing that what is ahead of me is unlike anything I have ever before experienced, I will be free to feel whatever feelings sail my way. Now my wrists are tingling, now my neck, the trees are starting to wave at me, and I'm not at all sure how much time is passing anymore, since I get the distinct feeling time is in the process of becoming *elastic*.

Staring at Ramon, staring at him staring at me, I've never met a doctor who needed to take the same medicine as me in order to make me well, and I think that that's pretty fucking cool when you get right down to it. Meanwhile, there is tingling, but also churning sensations in the digestive tract, constant, steady reminders that all is not well in the province of the stomach, as though the body will *not* be denied the next time it decides to eject this unwanted matter, so you'd better be prepared, girl, you'd better be prepared. Ramon is practically motionless, as though he has simply been absorbed. For my part, I can't help but shiver a bit -- not because it's cold, but because my skin is starting to feel unusual, as though it's not the skin I normally wear. You got that?

Huge and sudden cramp and I am doubled over, falling from the chair onto my hands and knees, but nothing comes from my throat; perhaps I will lie here on the ground for a few minutes and wait for what comes next. Little shimmers on the edges of my vision, little traces of things that aren't quite there, little distortions, little quivers, little swirls and little pinpoint pricks of colored light envelop the periphery, but softly, subtly, so that I need to concentrate to recognize what's happening to my surroundings. My surroundings, needless to say, have decided to let it all hang out. The boundaries of what is Me are starting to become fluid. I may very well be melting into the ground.

Eyes closed, voyaging now behind the eyelids, feels so dreamy like I'm caught up in a river underwater being pulled by currents toward a distant far off land, feels like falling from an airplane through the sky or falling from a rocket ship through the void, feels like just before you go to sleep, except without the annoyance of your body weight to keep you

tethered to the bed. This is quite a mellow onset, I must say, so firmly entrancing with my lips pulled back in a smile and my hair underneath me like a pillow, just a slow slippery glide through the fringes of reality here, yes sir, I am definitely getting a kick out of this, and then

uncontrollably, violently, churning stomach sends fountains of sickening brown fluid, throat open wide, and naturally I am given to taste it all once again, and as the first contraction hits me, a virtual *explosion* rocks my head, powerful powerful widening widening broadening beautifully expanding sailing til I am almost everywhere at once and then, *splashes* and puddles of fluid are forming, on my hands, on the ground, I'm crawling but not fast enough to escape myself, gagging and choking and spitting and seething, and I am thankful it is only vomit, I am thankful I am not seeing blood and innards as well, for all the damage that's done, and then a *bursting* showering showering writhing intensity swimming and moving and shaking and melody making as

thoughts spin round me in a circle, enveloping me in a prism of pure philosophy, as a hole has been torn in reality and I am plummeting through the vacuum, sleek neon lightning bolts encompass my entirety til I can't tell this from that, til my me gets twisted and my I confused, and a terror rises up in me as I *lose* myself in the maelstrom. There is an absence of imagery that terrifies me, there is a nothingness, outlined by everything, that appalls me and assaults me, there is a shocking groove and a torrential voice that screams me farther and farther away from myself. My eyes are open, but I don't understand why the trees are dancing and why the air is chanting. I don't understand why I'm filled with unsettling shakes and dissonant blues.

Ramon helps me to my feet, leads me to a bucket filled with water, where I can wash my hands. As I plunge my hands into the water, however, I realize my mistake, for the water itself won't let go of my hands, the water itself is now dissolving my hands, turning my skin into fluid and leaving me frozen above the surface, unable to move for fear of losing myself to the dirt which is behind me. Then, just as rapidly, I'm standing, I'm towering over the area,

and suddenly, I am reinventing myself entirely.

Ramon and I are walking now through the jungle, side by side, discussing this and that which enters our heads as we go.

"How do you feel?" he says.

"I feel like I'm a rubber band," I reply, "sort of... stretched throughout all existence."

"You're walking pretty well for a rubber band."

"Yeah, I'm getting used to these legs again. We're on some kind of psychic plateau, right?"

"I don't know," he says. "I don't know where we are."

"I feel like singing."

"That's a good idea. Singing is a good idea. There are dozens and dozens of songs which are good for singing right now."

"Umm, well, I only know a few songs, really."

"Sure, sure, just pick one, let's sing it."

"The one I want to sing is called 'I Know An Old Lady.'"

"Sing it to me," he implores.

"I'm not a trained singer, you know."

"Just sing, I will understand."

"But I do enjoy singing," I say, stepping over a fallen log.

"Yah, and I enjoy listening," he says, stepping onto the fallen log, halting for a moment. "I can see the whole jungle from here."

"What's it look like?"

"Sing to me."

Taking a deep breath, humming a few notes to warm up, yes indeed, I got a slither inside of me, and then low and sultry it starts: "I know an old lady.... who swallowed a fly..."

"The whole jungle!" shouts Ramon. Then, he is suddenly attentive: "She swallowed a fly?"

"I don't know why," I sing, "she swallowed a fly.... I guess she'll die." Beginning, now, a small dance if you don't mind, traipsing ahead slowly, starting the second verse. "I know an old lady... who swallowed a spider... that *wiggled* and *wiggled* and *wiggled* inside her..." certainly feel a spider inside me, little devil, listen to the poor thing wriggle, "she swallowed the spider to catch the fly..." until I'm almost seven or eight feet tall, ha ha, "but I don't know why.... she swallowed the fly.... I guess she'll die...." seeing Ramon without the left side of his body, but I guess that's no big deal.

There we go, the two of us, deeper and deeper into the heart of the jungle, and my voice reverberates for miles as I sing, "I know an old lady... who swallowed a *bird*.... My, how absurd!" absurd, absurd? absurd, "she swallowed a bird..." chirping chirp between my teeth, "she swallowed the bird to catch the spider... that

"WRIGGLED and WRIGGLED and"

can you see me wriggle? "WRIGGLED inside her..." sakes alive, "she swallowed the spider to catch the fly... but i don't know why..." birdhouse with a search light and a disco ball, "she swallowed the fly... I guess she'll die...." someone left their spleen out here, and they're probably going to need it. Is it starting to rain?

"I know an old lady...." sing it, Melody! comes his voice from three paces back and simultaneously inside my BRAIN MATTER, "who swallowed a *cat*... Fancy That! She swallowed a cat!" sexy saxophone on top of my licks, and I sing, "she swallowed the cat... to catch the bird...." need some kind of rope, or a lasso, really, "she swallowed the bird.... to catch the spider...." can you feel it coming? good lord, but it's enthralling, "that *wiggled* and *wiggled* and *wiggled*" ought to try wriggling, really, before they ban it, "inside her... she swallowed the spider" kind of shards are falling down next to me, piercing Ramon's skull and leaving him a bloodied awful horrible mess, who still is able to walk, nonetheless, "to catch the fly... but I don't know why" who's going to wash the sickening "she swallowed the fly" stepping on little eyeballs where there used to be rocks, but the sensation is actually addictive in a way "...I guess she'll die...." uh huh, lordy lordy.

"I know an old lady..." comes the next verse, whistling through the trees, whisper to me good reviews and sacred scents, "who swallowed a *dog*... My, what a *hog*! She swallowed a dog..." feeling the sweet ecstasy of offal and precious jewels "she swallowed the dog to catch the cat..." with your hand so far down the poor child's throat you can carve your initials on his stomach, "she swallowed the cat to catch the bird..." Ramon to be more of a conversationalist, but he can't seem to keep his gravity working, "she swallowed the bird to catch the spider..." says the man before his brain expands like an air bag, "that *wiggled* and *wiggled* and" massaged me "*wiggled* inside her," jump back, "she swallowed the spider to catch the fly..." the one about the salad dressing and the open heart surgery, "but I don't know why she swallowed the fly...."

You listening to me?

"I guess she'll die..."

I can feel a rave-up coming, as we slither in and out of the trees, avoiding the slow drops of blood red rain that have started to fall by simply standing where they aren't, and he says, "Goodness, young one, I had no idea you were such a" horrifying blob of protoplasm "and what lungs you got, too!" And I say, "*Listen to this*," and the next words outta my

mouth sing, "I know an old lady," oh, lord, do I know her, "who swallowed a *goat*," girl isn't thinking straight to put so much *goo* into her gullet, "she just opened her throat, and swallowed a goat!" do you realize you've invoked the Great Satan? "She swallowed the goat to catch the dog..." comes swinging down like Tarzan with a vestal virgin under one arm and "she swallowed the dog to catch the cat..." skin splits and the organs burst forth, tasting a kind of terpsichorean freedom while she *screams* and *wiggles* and "she swallowed the cat to catch the bird..." hasn't got time for a chat, as there is real genocide to attend to, "she swallowed the bird to catch the spider," and of course, I think this is my favorite part, "that *wiggled* and *wiggled* and" slithered like the snake you are, child "*wiggled* inside her... she swallowed to catch the" virus running up my nose and through my nervous system, which speaks like "but I don't know why... she swallowed the" horrifying brown goo that "guess she'll" eviscerate the world with sharp incisors and watch the lifeblood of the earth pour out.

"I know an old lady," her name was Sally Ann Sagacious and she was one *out there* woman, lemmetellya, "who swallowed a *horse*" and wouldn't you know it, I turn around, and there's Ramon, slowly sinking into the ground waving goodbye, leaving me here surrounded by the ominous jungle in the middle of a thunderstorm....

"She's dead, of course."

Out of breath, no more singing. Where'd he go, damn it?

Sitting in the warm warm rain, watching several trees turn themselves into mirrors for my sake, such a generous wonderful gift, except,

now I must look at myself.

There's me! Wave hello to Melody, Melody. Hi, Melody! say the lips of my twin mouth, and I too, simultaneously as it turns out. Hi, sweetheart. A flood fills me cool and gentle like, swaying in the rain, says, I haven't seen myself in a mirror in aeons now, and who is it I see when I get the chance to look? Here's what she looks like to me (here's what I look like to her (we look like to them and they to (when we look we aren't) us)), I think she's beautiful (yes we do) and she has long (*loooooong*) black hair making a shawl around her shoulders, damp and stark in the rain rain rain, thunder thunder in the in the sky, like sky, like angels in a bowling alley, no? ("The angels are bowling," my mother always said when there was thunder.) What a quizzical expression! And why, I've got three eyes and seven mouths! I don't look like what I remember at all, at all, but that

is definitely me, with the large third eye in the center of my forehead and the seven tiny mouths singing blessed be hosanna hey in seven part harmony and Melody, such seductive rhythms the mind can produce, and I certainly feel like swaying. I see the thin black blouse she's wearing stuck close to her, warm like second skin, shrill like second sight, and I see her lovely patterned skirt collapsed around her lap like a hot air balloon that's slowly deflating, and I see a person inside those clothes who's got two hearts and a thousand lungs, and when my own three eyes lock onto her three eyes, I see

infinity in a candle, sacred rivers of adolescence, whirling churning sighs and floating chalices filled with wine and blood and holy essence, can you almost taste the smoky joy, and when I smile, I see seven holy rainbows, seven wondrous hilltops, when I stick out my tongue and shout "Boo!" like a spirit, I can almost hear heaven clambering for a look. And as I watch myself, amidst the multi-colored swirls that whirl and churn and swim all around me, I see myself slowly

rising off the ground, with incredible lightness, such sweet, sweet sanity slipping from my insides like a stream in which to bathe myself, see me slowly, so slowly, raising inch by wonderful inch off the ground, and my counterpart me rises with me, and near me, my companion she is in the magic and wonder, my image of me, my all my self conception and perception and deception is made flesh where she sits, in the air, on a river of magic on a raft made of spirit, now she's laughing and laughing and laughing so sweet, listen to those crystalline voices rising up through the jungle, and the rain is an orchestra, the thunder the timpani, and the tune we are creating is called

"lullabye"

for there is a stain on her heart, which I can see from here, a glowing red pool marring an otherwise beauteous countenance, origins unknown, wasn't there the last time I looked. "What's gotten into you?" but she doesn't want to answer, I see the fear and the shame on her beautiful face, such a deep deep sadness cuts me deeply and quickly. Her four hands from four arms desperately cover the glow, but the insidious red light escapes through her fingers, casts a shadow upon me that I can *feel* sure as ice. "I'm sick," she says, "and I believe it's terminal." Gasp gasp gasping for air air in the rain, gasp in the rain, sure as ice, gasp in the rain for she's

me, and she's

dying, there's something untended in there, something hard and rock solid and rigid and vicious, something cold and furious in there, right, kid? uh huh, whisper, don't let the trees know. Our secret, okay? "No," not here, no secrets from the rain and the thunder (sing louder!), you have to *tell* me, for we share a heart (we share two! (keep singing!)) don't leave me here to twist in the wind, high above the ground in the midst of the jungle canopy, you have to tell me or we'll fall like sick stones to the dirt. And she says,

"I don't like this living business anymore. It's got me *afraid*," says it seven times, "and *fear* is a poison."

Poison? I know somebody who knows how to cure poisons. Ramon?

Pause.

Ramon?

"He doesn't fly," she says, "you oughta know that by now."

Three years later (or maybe it's only a coupla hours), I'm walking along, trying to get my bearings, aiming for the hut to get dry again but not necessarily displeased to be out in the jungle alone either, when who do I see headed my way but my super hero pal, the Amazing Dr. X. He's a foot and a half taller than he normally is, and his normally immaculate white suit has been swapped out for a monk's robe, but it's him, all right.

"Having some troubles, my child?" he says sincerely.

"Uh huh," I say. "I lost my heart a few miles back, and also, I think I need a chocolate bar."

He produces from his robe quite possibly the largest single bar of chocolate I believe I have seen, gorgeous in its naked chocolate-ness.

"Hand it over," I say.

The first bite is quite possibly the most entrancing and delectable bite of chocolate I have ever tasted, unmatched in the history of chocolate eating in its creaminess and delicious sweetness, unmatched, that is, until the second bite, which surpasses the first by an order of magnitude and comes with whipped cream, to boot. By the time I've gotten to the third bite, even the trees are inching in closer, wanting a bite, but of course, the third bite was only a setup for the fourth incredible bite which slithers straight down into that special spot in my body where chocolate turns itself into gold and trades itself in for a metaphysical sailboat.

"How's the ayahuasca treating you?" he asks with a sardonic grin.

The merest mention of the term reminds me that I need to throw up again; I'm efficient this time, however, hurling a sheer stream of bile into the ground and then returning his smile and replying, "Were you talking to me?"

"I wanted to show you something," he says.

"Oh?"

"Uh huh. I noticed you were having trouble with your heart a while back."

"Oh, that. Yeah, it's poisoned, I think. I don't have much time left to live."

"Right, right. Well, see, what *I* did is, *I* just had the thing surgically removed."

"No shit?"

"No shit. I did it myself, with a dull shrimp fork. Here, look."

And with that, he pulls his robe back wide, and underneath his head where there ought to be a chest is simply empty blackness

and space, and void, and nothingness, and all things contained within are naught but emptiness and sheer inescapable isn't,

and where there oughta be somthin', there is only a giant snake, a viper lashing out at me, sinking its fangs deep into my wrist, sucking at the vein, and I cry out "help me" but the head of Dr. X is only cackling and cackling before collapsing onto the ground, like the head of a mannequin tumbling down off the shoulders, and slowly the snake is dragging me in, pulling me toward the portal of hollow absence that sits before me, and moments later, I am

not

walking through a corridor, in an empty hall, looking at the picture frames and the paintings within. One particular frame strikes my fancy: it is the picture of a car crash, and there are little dancing shadows all around the wreckage, and the shadows are actually dancing for me as I stare at the painting, and then

the next painting is of me, and the next painting is of a more vicious me, and the

next painting is of a me who is dying of pure viciousness, until

finally I come to a giant mural of me, and I recognize this me, for she is naked to the waist and sits on a throne of pure evil, and

Ramon whispers in my ear, "You will need to ask her for the antidote, don't you think?"

And I am feeling faint... ever so faint... and I can feel him pouring another dose down my throat, another dose of the ayahuasca, to help me truly *absorb* the painting in front of me.

And the me in the painting says, tones pure as hatred,

"What can I do for *you*?"

And I begin to scream, as

the unbelievably angry insanity of the vision before me infuriates me and terrifies me as I float into the unfolding scene, imaginary walls melting and dissolving all around me, the trees of the jungle twisting and distorting themselves to form row after row of helpless, prostrate victims of the senseless alternate me, the demon song upon her throne before me, beckoning me closer to her with a vindictive, bloodthirsty smile, and in these moments of sheer incoherent assault upon me, I am aware now, fully, of what the demons at InfiniTek had in store for me.

"This is what they wanted," says Ramon, whisper tickle in the back of my mind's eye, dancing like a jaguar through the forests through the trees, "this is your future they have given you." He is nowhere near me and yet I feel him clearly in my mind, feel him dancing joyously somewhere in the jungle behind me, dancing tirelessly, and singing many praises to the spirits of the dead, the future dead and the present dead.

"So this is how it begins," says my counterpart on the throne, the demon song, she of the gilded pools of boiling hatred and sweltering, fiery breath. "At long, long last, after all is said and done, finally you come to challenge me."

I am a bubbling mass of upright lava, defined by indescribable pain, and I reply, "I don't know you."

"But you know what happened to me," she replies, an absolute wellspring of remorseless fury pouring from her eyes, washing over the ground and drowning the helpless at her feet. "Nothing can destroy me now. Here in this world where I am given to reign free, this is the final stage of humanity's last days. You may prevent such terror in *your* world, but in *mine*, your presence is as meaningless as the tears of dying children."

And I am fallen prostrate before her, my own tears welling up inside of me, the utter hopelessness of this world that could have been; my sympathy is worthless, my best intentions dashed upon the ground. How could I have ever gone so wrong? I can feel a red hot bullet lodged deep within my heart: the sickness they embedded deep within me is taking now

its toll, and I can't shake it loose, can't pry it from its perch, can't stop it from consuming me, and then I feel

whispering souls and dancing shadows, the lives of all those Others who are at stake, participating in the Melodrama; somewhere, at some point, here or there or down the line, someone is taking notice,

prisms of impossibility crashing down all around me,

a sudden rainshower thunderstorm of harmonies and choruses,

and the jungle trees coalesce once more into a mirror that peers into the very nature of everything,

revealing everything,

providing everything,

and letting me taste its beauty.

"I am," says the voice inside the giant tree, and Job and I take notice. "I am," says the voice who swirls about the dancing form of Ramon and all his jungle apparitions. "I am," says the voice, deep inside my soul, of that which knows which way is true,

and I am humbled in its presence,

and I am shorn of all my walls,

and I am stripped of all my artifice,

and I am filled with light and heat. this is

impossible magic, sheer wonder and untold wisdom, and slowly the story of this alternate world takes shape inside my mind, as a warning to me, an admonition from reality itself, the visions of the lost cry out for peace and shimmering Hope, and I am

standing tall upon a foundation of pain and whispering souls, and I slowly take steps toward her, crossing the chamber inch by untenable inch, saying, "They programmed you with a desire to rule, a desire that drew upon your deep need for revenge, and they gave you a deeply rooted drive for power, which propelled you into this position. When the appropriate time came, they unleashed the full fury of your supernatural self, the self that knows the Dreamtime, the self that conjures reality wherever it goes, except you had been poisoned in advance, so that when the appropriate time came, the lure of power consumed you, and the Dreamtime became fouled by your presence. This is what happened in your storyline, in the doomed Plot of your existence.

"It wasn't easy for them to do," I say, much louder now, gaining strength as Ramon's pounding rhythms and sweet sweet singing gives me sustenance, "for you have always been so strong, so full of life." The vision now is one of unearthly awe and desperate clarity, as dancing shadowy figures rise up out of the floor to accompany me on my slow advance

toward the future. "However, in the end, you had no choice but to submit," I continue, and I am growing now in stature, easily equaling the massive figure of the demon song before me, who rises now to punish me for my blasphemy, destroy me for my insolence, "for you were assaulted by forces that *were not human*, and in the end, their alien-ness prevailed."

She hisses loudly and screams with seven deadly voices, and then she grabs my shoulders and brutally sinks her teeth into my cheek and tears away the flesh; I cry out as a fountain of blood and rainbow heat bursts from the open wound. And as the blood pours from me, I feel such sadness and despair, I feel such danger and destruction, I feel her feeding on that part of me that wishes I controlled my fate, chewing on the skin and flesh and feeding on the blood and bile, draining me of poisons and cancers and misguided notions, she is feeding on my blind spots, nourishing herself with my failings, seeking furiously for all my sorrow, all my regret, and as she sucks from me the horrid all of me, I experience it all once more as it rushes through my veins and through my heart and through my wounded face, I see her manic smile and gleaming, hollow eyes and I feel my skin collapsing, drained of all the fuel that secretly kept me alive for so long imprisoned, drained of all the hidden reserves of hatred and fear and sickness that I relied on like a friend. My muscles are a sunken pulpy mass that cannot support my powdery bones, and I collapse, discarded and emptied, and I am

silent now,
free of such alien notions as
hatred and fear and sickness,
free of the bitterness that could have driven me for the rest of my
life,
free of the bitterness that could have been my salvation, had I not
discovered
emptiness,
and silence,
and freedom. And there is a tinkling, bittersweet tune quietly
playing in the back of my mind, like a music box to which I've finally
found the key, and as it plays, I cry holy tears of simple farewell to all that
once was me, not sorrow at its parting nor sorrow that it ever was, but holy
tears of cleansing, to prepare myself as vessel for what's to come.

Rising from the floor, my soul discards the empty shell that has no purpose, the wounded, bloodied figure of the child who ventured alone into the jungle, never to return. Multi-colored swirls and shafts of music

fill the air, whirling and churning and humming blissful forms and counterforms, coalescing in the air around me, strands of essence becoming Attracted to me, and the chamber is filled with luminescence, the majesty of birth producing a spectacular sight and sound, new bones carved from the jaws of the universe, new skin fashioned from the sheen of the galaxies, comet trails and rainbow threads forming the long, long wash of hair down my radiant back, two glowing moons become my eyes and my hands find themselves at the ends of long spiral arms. And the terrified demon song before me tries to flee but I have already captured her in my embrace, brought her face to mine, peered deep into her soul and found her secrets, and I bring her lips to mine and kiss them sweetly. Where my form collides with hers, our spirits merge; and she, now, gives up her self to me, collapses in my influence; I have no need to feed upon the vestiges of Hope within her, for she gives them to me freely, sacrifices what she didn't know was there, in the mutual Hope that what befell her there will not befall her here, what befell me there will not befall me here, and here we will tell the story with such heart that the presence of evil in her world serves to sanctify the presence of Us in this world.

And when at last I open my eyes, I no longer see the demon song before me. Instead I see a small and frightened twelve-year-old girl, in the simple white dress I only wore to school, and I say, "Take my hand," and soon enough, we are walking away together from this hall of horrors and into the wonder of the world....

It's hours later when I'm finally able to pull myself off the jungle floor and begin the trek back to Ramon's hut, the location of which I simply cannot remember. The all-encompassing visions have finally stopped; although I still feel higher than a kite in the stratosphere, I no longer have too much trouble recognizing the trees for actual trees, and I'm mostly able to keep a coherent thought in my head for a while, although not without some concentration. About the time it occurs to me to be worried because I'm lost in the jungle, I inadvertently stumble upon the exact location of the hut; at another time, this might have surprised me, but I have already had enough surprises for the evening. I see Ramon still sitting in the lawn chair where he was when we began, despite the fact that it's raining like crazy. He's got a smile on his face a mile wide, and I have to admit, it's good to see him in the flesh again.

I sit down next to him, wired and exhausted.

"How did you like the jungle?" he asks.

For some inexplicable reason, I begin laughing like crazy, and Ramon quickly joins me. The two of us laugh and laugh together in the middle of the pouring rain, our laughter punctuated by occasional cracks of thunder. And then, we are silent for a long, long time, merely staring in awe at the lightning that now and then brilliantly illuminates the sky.