



Plant Helpers

I MUST HAVE SLEPT FOR HOURS. IT WAS NEARLY DARK when Annie came up the ladder to wake me. “Joe, wake up,” she whispered, shaking me gently. “Eduardo’s been out there all afternoon, cooking some plants in a clay pot over the fire. He says it’s almost time for the ritual.”

“Ritual?” I mumbled, groaning as I tried to twist my way out of the hammock.

“That’s what he called it. He said it’s time for us to start.”

“I’m coming.”

I followed Annie down the ladder, stopping to stretch once I had my feet on the ground. Eduardo sat beside a blackened pot, stirring its contents with a stick. He beckoned to me.

“I have collected parts of two sacred plants. They are very special,” he said, gesturing toward the pot. “They do not grow together; they grow very far apart. One is a vine. I have chopped and pounded it and then added it to the brew.” He stirred a thick, green liquid; dark, woody strands of bark floated to the top. “The other plant gives us a leaf. It also has been crushed and added to the brew. The drink is almost ready. I must strain the brew, and then we will let it cool. After that, we may begin.”

Sarah, Michael, and Annie had gathered around to

watch. The sun was setting and the twilight called out the mosquitoes and other night insects. We made sure we were covered up and had citronella oil on our bare skin. We all had net hats nearby. The mood of the evening was quiet and serious.

Eduardo strained the liquid through a piece of white cloth into a smaller clay pot. He covered the small pot with the cloth, and asked us to get our cups. He then poured a portion of the drink in each cup, and instructed us to set the mugs on a rock beside the fire. Everyone had apparently decided to participate in this experience, even Annie. She must have changed her mind after her long debate with Michael.

Eduardo passed his water flask around and told us to drink our fill. "Can you tell us what your brew is made of?" I asked.

"He already told us all about it," Michael responded. "While you were sleeping. He's gathered plants of two species, a vine and a leaf. I believe the vine is a *liana*. He calls it the 'vine of the soul.' I can probably determine the genus and species after we return to the States."

"This is an ancient shamanic brew," Eduardo added. "I learned how to make it from my grandmother. No one knows how long it has been used, or exactly how the first person knew how to make it. It is said that the Earth mother led someone to the plants in a dream, and that is how it was first made, perhaps a thousand years ago."

"He told us he makes the brew about once a year," Michael added, "and has been using it for thirty years."

"What's it called?" I asked. "Does it have a name?"

"*Si. Natema*," Eduardo replied. He said it could not be translated into English.

We all sat together by the fire. "We will all drink at the same time," Eduardo instructed. "You may feel ill for a while. If so, just lie down on your back. You may lie in your mosquitera if you prefer. It is alright to be by yourself. It may even be better to be by yourself. I will remain here by the fire all night and I will watch over you so you

do not wander into the jungle. There is nothing to be afraid of. I will make sure that you are safe at all times.”

“How long will this last?” Sarah asked.

“Most of the night,” he replied. “You will not be able to sleep, but you will be able to rest. Time will be meaningless. Eventually you will fall into a deep sleep.

Traditionally, only men drink the brew. But Lucita drank it more than once.” He glanced at the cups. “It is time. Take your cups and begin to drink. Sip the brew slowly and try to drink all of it. It may take you an hour or more to do so.”

We each took our cups from the rock and held them in our hands, as if offering a reluctant toast to each other. I hesitantly took a sip and sputtered. It was extremely bitter. “Whew! I can see why it would take an hour to finish a cup of this stuff,” I said, taking another small drink, letting the heavy liquid sit in my mouth and slowly seep down my throat. Sarah and Annie both winced when they tasted their brew, their faces curling up in disgust. Michael imbibed without expression. Eduardo drank nonchalantly, watching us closely. We continued in this manner for about ten minutes, then Annie was the first to succumb.

“Oh no!” she cried suddenly. “I’m gonna throw up!” She set her cup down quickly and jumped into the dark bushes behind us, vomiting fiercely.

“Oh god, oh, god,” Sarah moaned as she rocked back and forth on her log seat, holding her hands over her ears. Then she jumped up and disappeared into the bushes too. The sounds of two vomiting women could be heard amidst the orchestra of night insects. We three men stared at the fire in silence, each cradling a cup of the bitter brew in our hands. I clenched my teeth, trying hard to ignore the retching and gagging sounds for fear I would be joining them.

Several minutes later both women returned, wiping their mouths on their shirtsleeves. “I’ve had enough,” Annie announced abruptly. “I can’t drink this stuff. It’s horrible. I’m going to bed. Sorry guys, you’ll just have to go on without me. You can tell me all about it tomorrow.”

“Me, too,” added Sarah. “Have fun.”

We watched them disappear into the darkness.

Minutes later, faint fingers of lamplight could be seen piercing the stick wall of our hut. Aside from the glow of the dwindling fire, the light from that kerosene lamp was the only thing visible in the inky blackness of the jungle night.

We drank more. I was feeling very nauseous and clammy and had begun to sweat profusely. Nevertheless, I sipped the brew as Eduardo instructed, a little at a time, stopping whenever nausea overcame me, or when I knew I would vomit if I even caught a whiff of the drink. Eventually, I couldn't force myself to drink another sip. Just the thought of it made me want to puke. I had sipped almost two-thirds of the cup, so I set it on the ground beside me. I felt so awful that weakness and shaking overcame me and I had to lie down. Fortunately, the log I sat on was long enough for me to lie on my back with my feet propped on either side for stability. I couldn't have walked anywhere. I felt utterly weak, sick, and dizzy, and had to either remain horizontal or else go somewhere to throw up. The log was hard and would have been uncomfortable under any other circumstances, but now it felt extraordinarily soft and warm.

Minutes, maybe hours passed, and then, suddenly, I noticed sharp flashes, slivers of colored lights, appearing at the edges of my field of vision. Faint sounds rushed through my ears as if they were coming from a long distance away. They seemed to be moving closer. The chorus of nocturnal amphibians and insects took on a new dimension, filling my head and developing into a richness I had never experienced before, a symphonic splendor that would have shamed any philharmonic orchestra. I could hear individual human-like voices in the sound, first low baritones, then high sopranos, as if they were each, in turn, singing directly to me. I could *feel* the sound entering my ears. Incredibly intricate, colorful patterns bloomed before me, convoluting and folding into themselves against the

backdrop of the night.

The mysterious baritones in the distance seemed to merge with the nocturnal orchestra and boom louder, and with each pulse, a transparent red sphere emanated from nowhere and passed over me. I could *see* the sounds that I heard as well as feel them. I sat up effortlessly, or I was pulled up — I don't know which.

Eduardo was still sitting in the same place on the ground beside the fire, crosslegged. He was motionless except for his right arm, which slowly tapped a gourd rattle against his thigh. Each shake of the gourd poured sound over me like rain, draining into my ears. Each sweep of his arm left a blur of light and color by his side, phosphorescent. As I stared at him, he turned his head and looked at me with eyes like deep, luminescent pools. It was as if I was looking into his body through windows. I had the thought that I was peering into his soul. I knew that I looked the same way to him.

When our eyes made contact, I instantly knew that we were both the same entity, without separation. The He and I disappeared. There was no us, we were one. I had no concept of Self. My individual personality had vanished. There was nothing separating me from what was around me, because there was no *me* to segregate things. I was what Eduardo was, and what Michael was. Pure awareness, nothing more. I saw everything, and I understood everything.

It was as if I had been spending my life inside a semi-translucent bubble, unable to clearly see the world around me. Everywhere I looked, I had seen my reflection on its curved walls, distorting my view of the world outside. My every view of life was a reflection of *myself* transposed upon all of my surroundings. I hadn't realized that what I was seeing was actually only a meager reflection on the sides of my bubble, and not a true representation of reality. Now the thin walls of the bubble had burst, and I could see the world clearly, without reflections or distortions. My consciousness was a drop of water that, having lost its surface

tension, dissolved into an ocean of consciousness. For a period without time, in a place without boundaries, I was not there, and yet, I was everywhere. I became the Earth Mother. I *became* the Great Mystery.

I remember eventually seeing the first glimpse of dawn light filtering through the jungle canopy and knowing that it was the most beautiful thing anyone could possibly ever see. I was not bitten by a single insect that evening. We three men never exchanged a word between us all night. Eventually, I climbed into my hammock and fell into the deepest sleep of my life.