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**Edited by H. David Blalock**

# **parABnormal Magazine**

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# Beyond Medicine

## Dustin Grinnell

When Allie's canoe tapped the dock in Iquitos, Peru, she didn't know which was greater: her exhaustion or her anticipation. After hours on the Amazon River, she was sticky with sweat, and her arms and legs itched and ached in the wake of countless mosquito bites. However, their arrival meant she was that much closer to experiencing a traditional shaman-led ayahuasca ceremony.

Allie dragged herself from her seat and onto dry land. After taking a moment to roll her neck and shoulders, which had become tight from rowing, she hefted her bags onto her back. Then she joined the rest of the group as they followed a guide along a narrow path through dense forest. When they reached an open encampment, she was directed to a private bungalow, where she dropped her bags, and a larger hut for dinner.

Entering the larger hut, Allie and the others took seats around a table made from the cross section of a tree. She was just getting settled when they were joined by the shaman, who wore a colorful shawl and had his dirty-blond hair pulled back into a bun.

"Welcome, welcome." He removed a lit cigar from between his lips. "My name is Matteo. I am so glad you've come all this way to see me. Please eat! You've traveled a long way and must be starving."

In the dim lighting of a kerosene lamp, the group ate papayas, bananas, and breadfruit while Matteo told them about his healing practice. It centered around the potent ayahuasca brew, which had produced remarkable stories of healing in combination with his traditional ceremony.

Allie was familiar with many of these stories after months of reading about the white man who had left his middle-class life in California years before to treat his depression through shamanistic ritual here in Peru. Years of training had turned Matteo into a powerful healer, some believed, and people visited him from all over the world in

search of cures for anything from addiction and asthma to depression and cancer.

As a neurosurgeon, Allie was skeptical, yet emerging research on ayahuasca was compelling. Studies had shown that ayahuasca improved the body's absorption of serotonin—the “happy hormone.” Knowing this, Allie had tapered her use of SSRIs leading up to her trip lest the ayahuasca lead to serotonin syndrome.

Matteo blew out a plume of smoke. “*Ayahuasca* means ‘vine of the soul.’ The ayahuasca concoction you will drink during the healing ceremony contains a chemical that will produce visions. These visions will allow you to bypass your mental defenses and access deeper layers of your subconscious, which will help you reorient the way you perceive yourself.”

“Die to the flesh; awaken to the spirit,” someone remarked.

Matteo nodded. “We call it *ego death*.” The wrinkles in his face lifted. “The ceremony will also allow you to purge any bad spirits that might have attached to you throughout your life. During the ceremony, I’ll protect you from harmful spirits, but you will need to be brave for the shamanistic healing to work.”

Allie raised an eyebrow. “Spirits?”

“People who have passed on but haven’t yet left the earth. There are many: proud spirits, spirits who are envious of our human forms, despondent spirits. Some can be harmful, and I’ll fight those off if they appear. However, not all spirits mean harm. During the ceremony, pay attention to what you see—images of loved ones or strange figures—as they may have some significance.”

Mentioning the healing center—which sat behind the hut they ate in—Matteo instructed them to meet there by nine that night for the ayahuasca ceremony.

After dinner, Allie trudged along a narrow dirt path to her bungalow. She washed her face and lay down on her bed. Yet exhausted though she was, she didn’t dare close her eyes lest she invite in a rush of unwanted images: the sixty-pound body of her older sister, Vera, writhing on a hospital bed, gasping for breath in her final hours, eyes

sunken, skin loose, papery-skinned hands reaching toward Allie in desperation.

A talented engineer and pride of the family, Vera had been destined for her dream job at NASA when she'd been burdened with a mysterious chronic disease that affected the connective tissues and led to severe malnutrition. Allie had tried so hard to work with her sister's doctors to help diagnose and treat Vera's disease, but it hadn't been enough. She even feared all her efforts had somehow complicated matters, leading to Vera's untimely death.

Right at nine, Allie entered the healing center, not sure what to expect. Everyone else was already present, seated quietly on meditation cushions. Behind them, empty yoga mats splayed out in several rows. Standing at the front of the room, Matteo sang in a language Allie didn't recognize, and he smiled and nodded to her when she met his gaze. Beside him sat a large barrel that no doubt contained the ayahuasca brew.

A petite man with a soft face, who'd been introduced to them earlier as Matteo's apprentice, led Allie to a cushion. He collected her cell phone, offering to take pictures if he could. He placed a cup in front of her, as well as a plastic pail for vomit.

"What is he singing?" Allie inquired.

"Songs that call forth the plants' healing properties," the apprentice explained.

Matteo continued singing as he ladled a thick, brown concoction out of the barrel into cups. He handed the cups to his apprentice. While Matteo only filled most of the cups halfway, the one he filled for Allie was filled to the top.

The apprentice set the cup down in front of Allie and winked. "Those who need the most healing get the most brew."

Allie's neighbor eyed her cup. "You must be teeming with demons."

*Demons. Just another word for trauma.*

As she waited for Matteo's command to drink, Allie examined the awful-smelling sludge. By drinking this disgusting potion, she hoped she would stop obsessing

over her sister's death. Stop calling the hospital where Vera had died, demanding to review her medical records so she could check her glucose levels leading up to the heart attack. Stop writing op-ed pieces about how deadly medical errors were in the United States.

A few days before Vera died, Allie had requested the services of a renowned eating disorder specialist from a prestigious hospital in New York City who, after evaluating Vera, hadn't had much to offer. Why hadn't she instead consulted a rheumatologist, who could've assessed Vera's connective tissue? She could've brought in a talented diagnostician to try to determine the root cause of her vexing illness. Why hadn't she just checked Vera's electrolyte balance herself before she left for the night?

Allie had put her medical career on pause and left her chic apartment in Boston's Back Bay to travel to Peru in the desperate hope the ceremony would help her accept that she couldn't have done any more the night Vera died. Maybe then the images of her sister would stop keeping her awake at night. Maybe then Allie could move on.

Once all the filled cups had been handed out, Mateo scanned the room and nodded, giving everyone permission to drink. Allie closed her eyes, lifted the cup to her mouth, and drank the brew in three gulps. Putting the cup down, she watched the others swig the sludge.

Matteo instructed his apprentice to turn down the lamplight. Allie sat calmly and watched Matteo dance and sing in the dim light. After about twenty minutes, her head felt fuzzy, and her arms and legs tingled. Her vision filled with globs of light: first red, then green and blue. A kaleidoscope of shapes appeared: triangles, rectangles, and shapes she didn't even know names for. Then they blurred into streaks of color.

Allie tensed as the colors transformed into horrifying images: an anaconda bloated from feeding; a tarantula; a flash of piranhas shredding a horse flailing in shallow water; a caterpillar losing its legs; a mangled hand in a blender.

Then Allie saw Vera in the hospital bed, more malnourished than ever. Her skin was loose from the

severe weight loss. Her back contorted, her thin arms reached out, and her fingers wrapped around Allie's neck.

*"Why couldn't you just leave me alone?"* Vera screamed. "You brought in your fancy doctors, but how did any of them help?"

Allie gasped for breath, struggling against her sister's hold. "Help me!"

"I'm here, Allie," Matteo called, singing louder. "I am protecting you."

Allie didn't feel protected. She felt alone in the darkness. Both Matteo's words and her own thoughts sounded far away.

Instead, the walls closed in, and she fell backward into a cloud of thick smoke. She climbed a rope slippery with grime—climbing, slipping, climbing, and finally slipping off altogether. She fell, tumbling end over end, and splashed hard into glacial waters. Then her skin burst into flames. She was submerged in water, but still, somehow, her skin was ablaze.

Allie reached blindly for the pail beside her and vomited.

Even as she retched, Allie was back in the hospital, watching her sister suffer a heart attack, as if she'd been in the room that night. A faint heartbeat sounded from a distant monitor. It was cut short by a long, high-pitched whine. The doctors pressed on Vera's chest, snapping her brittle ribs.

Allie drifted into a memory from later that night. Vera's doctor stood before them in a waiting room. "We resuscitated her, but she has no brain function."

Her sister was a vegetable.

After days of deliberation, hoping Vera would defy medical science and awaken, Allie decided to withdraw care. Her father nodded in agreement, but he couldn't remember why they'd come to the hospital. Most days, he forgot about the shell of a person Vera had become. The Alzheimer's was too far advanced.

Allie vomited until her stomach was empty.

Questions swirled. The day before Vera's heart attack, Allie had brought one of the best cardiologists in New York

City to see Vera. When they had entered her room, Vera had hissed and told them to leave and never come back. What if Vera had allowed the specialist to consult on her case? They might've diagnosed the issue that led to the heart attack. They might have caught a medical error before it led to catastrophe.

Suddenly, the scent of smoke overwhelmed Allie. Her breathing became less shallow, and slowly, she returned to her body.

Matteo knelt over her. "Welcome back."

Allie searched his face. "Where was I?"

"In a place beyond names."

Allie closed her eyes and sobbed.

When she returned to her bungalow, Allie crashed into bed. Her body ached, and her head throbbed. Being so out of control during the ceremony had been terrifying. She'd never felt such profound fear. In the grip of the hallucinations, she had thought she would go insane.

Ego death, Matteo had called it.

As Allie stared up at the ceiling, she slowly realized her mood was different. She felt calmer than she had in years. Lighter. She allowed herself a soft smile.

When handing Allie back her phone, Matteo's apprentice had told her he had managed to take a picture of her during the ceremony. Now curious, she pulled her phone out of her pocket to see what he'd captured.

The image she found showed her sitting upright on her cushion with her eyes pressed shut. She frowned. There was something strange about the image. She peered more closely. Above her head hung a bright streak of light.

The flash of light ended at the crown of her head.

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A month later in Boston, Allie sipped a smoothie on the patio of her studio apartment in Back Bay while she contemplated the complex brain operation she would lead in a few hours. She thought about the brain scans of the elderly man whose life would soon be in her hands. She visualized the brain tumor trapped within a tangled knot of blood vessels in his left occipital lobe. The tumor had paralyzed the man's right arm and caused him to lose



sight in his right eye.

Most neurosurgeons wouldn't have even touched the surgical case. The patient was too old and had too many underlying medical issues that increased the risk of complications. It wasn't even clear how the tumor could be removed.

Yet Allie never shied away from a challenge. She had an encyclopedic knowledge of the human brain and the uncanny ability to focus for ten to twelve hours during a marathon surgery. While she would be the first to admit she lacked a talent for diagnosis, her technical skills made her a distinguished member of the neurosurgical team. She was a proficient mechanic, possessing "gifted hands" that made difficult surgical maneuvers possible. And she could improvise in sticky situations, if necessary.

That morning, Allie had awoken feeling fresh and energetic. For the past month, she had slept well, no longer needing medicine to knock her out every night. She had been more social, attending get-togethers with her fellow surgeons. She had even found time in her hundred-hour work week to go on a couple of dates.

She recalled that rainforest village in Peru. Whatever had happened that night, the clouds of depression had parted. The ayahuasca had caused a surge of serotonin in her brain, but unlike antidepressants, the effects had lasted, no additional dosages needed.

Yet even though Allie felt better than ever, she still didn't feel "healed." She remained anxious and tense at a level just below conscious awareness. Even weekly massages couldn't dissolve the tension in her shoulders, neck, and back. She often joked with Olivia, a junior neurosurgeon, that the anxiety had turned her body to stone. Olivia would tease her, saying Allie was like a quivering rabbit, always monitoring her environment and emitting a nervous energy everyone could sense.

Worse, every time a Code Blue blared over the hospital's intercom, indicating a patient was experiencing a life-threatening emergency, dread would surge through Allie. She could hear Vera's fragile ribs snapping with every forceful push on her chest. She would picture a

doctor standing over Vera's head and shoving a rigid tube down her windpipe. She would even replay the conversation with her father after it had become clear Vera had no neurological function.

Allie had told hospital administrators that such alarms were triggering for people like her. She had asked them to find a different technology to notify teams that a patient had coded, but her pleas had gone nowhere.

An hour later, Allie stood at a large stainless-steel sink, using a visualization technique to keep her mind as calm as a mountain lake as she scrubbed her hands. Once done, she pushed the door to the operating room open with her hip, keeping her hands high and in front of her.

In the center of the room, the man lay unconscious on the operating table. Before Allie had arrived, Olivia had spent an hour preparing the patient for the tumor resection. She had cut into the man's scalp and skull and had peeled back a triangle-shaped patch of skin and bone, revealing the gray convulsions of exposed brain tissue.

Ten minutes into the operation, Allie's gloved hands were covered in blood. Beside her, Olivia managed the patient's bleeding.

"Suction," Allie requested.

Olivia moved in with a suction pump. It sucked loudly as the area drained of blood.

Using the microscope attached to her surgical glasses, Allie navigated the contours of the patient's brain. She paused when she found the bundle of rope-like blood vessels she was looking for. Her eyes switched from the microscope to a computer screen that everyone in the room could see.

"Our brain tumor's in there."

Olivia vacuumed up a tiny blood clot. "That's quite a mess."

"Let's go digging."

A nurse handed Allie a tweezers-like instrument, and she picked at the densely packed area. Allie shook her head, frustrated. "These vessels won't come loose."

Suddenly, the brain region filled with thick, red blood.

“Intracranial bleed,” Olivia whispered.

“Clip that bleed, please.”

Olivia placed a clip over the lesion, pinching off the bleed. Allie used an instrument to cauterize the broken blood vessel. The operating room filled with the odor of burnt brain tissue.

Allie examined the area. “So much scarring.”

Olivia nodded as she continued to suction the area. “He’s lost a lot of blood.”

Allie glanced at the neurosurgeon who was frowning at the patient’s vitals on a nearby monitor. “Please prepare a transfusion bag, Dr. Simpson.”

He nodded and hung a blood bag on a stand.

Allie continued trying to untangle the knotted mess, but she felt a tinge of worry. Some of the blood vessels were stretched dangerously thin.

“If any of those blood vessels burst, the patient will hemorrhage,” Dr. Simpson announced.

“Keep your eyes on vitals, please.”

“We’re not far from calling it?”

Allie glared at him. It was far too early to give up on the patient. She knew Dr. Simpson wouldn’t mind if her patient died on her watch. Every surgeon had statistics: wins, losses, surgical complications. Dr. Simpson was the best diagnostician in the department and loved decrypting complex medical cases, but he envied Allie’s technical aptitude and had often tried to emulate her surgical techniques, without success. It’s why he didn’t accept complex cases. Still, he wanted to be chief of neurosurgery, so stats were important to him, and if Allie lost this patient, it would be his win.

Allie, on the other hand, didn’t care about titles. She was determined to save this patient, but she was stuck. Should she accept that the tangled mess of blood vessels was inoperable? Was Dr. Simpson correct?

Allie closed her eyes as the night Vera died flashed through her mind.

Her mind swirled over the medical errors that had occurred. So many people had cared for her sister, and a lot of information had gotten lost in the shuffle. Her blood

glucose level had been low when she'd been admitted to the hospital, and it was zero during the cardiac arrest. Had they not been monitoring her glucose levels? Had they forgotten to do blood work? Either would have been a tragic oversight. An intravenous sugar solution would've brought Vera's blood glucose back up to normal levels.

No one from the hospital had been held responsible for the errors that had led to her sister's death. Sometimes, while lying in bed unable to sleep, Allie would imagine ways of hurting the doctors who'd botched Vera's case. She'd whisper words that would cause them the terrible pain they deserved. Allie would say, "Crumple," and the lead doctor's head would ball up like used tissue paper. She'd say, "Choke," and the uncaring hospital administrator's throat would tighten until he couldn't breathe. Or she'd say, "Fire," and the nurse who'd forgotten to check Vera's blood glucose levels would ignite.

The idea that she could do such things with just a word might have been silly, but her patient's condition was dire, and she needed a miracle. Allie closed her eyes and whispered, "Untangle."

Opening her eyes, she examined the mass of vessels. Before her eyes, something impossible happened. It was subtle, like a flower turning to follow the sun's rays throughout the day, but the knotted blood vessels loosened, allowing Allie to pick away at them until they were all freed.

Untangled.

Allie scanned the eyes of those around her. Had they seen what she saw? Surely they had, yet no one looked awestruck.

Olivia smiled in admiration. "Well done, Dr. Watts."

"Please close him up, Dr. Simpson," Allie demanded.

She scrubbed out and stumbled into the hallway in a daze. Surely she'd just witnessed a coincidence. What had happened couldn't have had anything to do with the command she'd whispered. Maybe she'd imagined it—or gotten lucky, something doctors didn't like to admit.

Allie burst through the front doors of the hospital, startling a crow off the branch of a nearby tree. It swooped

past her as she headed for one of the hospital's gardens. Just as Allie went to sit on a wooden bench overlooking the garden, a loud thud filled the air.

Jerking around, she hurried over to the window from which the sound seemed to have come. In front of it lay the crow, twitching, its scalp bloodied.

"Oh no."

Allie knelt beside the bird as a wave of sadness washed over her. She held back tears, pushing down the grief that tried to break through. Without knowing why, she cupped the bird in her hands and watched it die.

She thought back to the miracle that had happened in the operating room. Could that "power" work here? Could she bring the crow back to life? She shuddered.

Keeping her eyes trained on the bird, Allie focused her attention on the weight in her palms. "Fly."

The bird jolted in her hands as if shocked by a bolt of electricity. Its eyes snapped open and darted back and forth, and its wings fluttered. Unable to hold onto it, Allie lifted her hands, and the bird burst into the sky. It swooped down, cutting through the garden and the leaves of the tree it had left just before it died. It banked into a strong wind, lifted high above the hospital, and disappeared into a cloud.

*Oh my God. What is going on?*

For a moment, Allie entertained the thought of a miracle, but miracles didn't happen twice, back to back. Allie remembered the bolt of light that had appeared above her head during the healing ceremony. She could've chosen to believe she'd been possessed by a rainforest demon, but she didn't. How else could she explain what was happening? Maybe an explanation lay somewhere in the middle ground between science and spirituality. She wondered if she possessed something else: a peculiar ability—a psychosomatic power, so to speak—that had been enhanced somehow in Peru.

In medical school, Allie had suffered from medical students' disease, frequently experiencing symptoms of the many diseases she studied. While studying dermatology, Allie had developed painful warts on her

knee. In orthopedics, she had experienced a clicking in her hip socket. She had developed tension headaches during neurology class.

The strange occurrences had always brought to mind Allie's favorite book, *Travels*, an autobiography by Michael Crichton, who had written best-selling science-fiction novels while studying to become a doctor at Harvard Medical School. Crichton's literary success had led to an existential crisis: should he pursue writing or continue with a medical career?

As the decision weighed on him, he had developed a troubling weakness in his arm. Crichton had been convinced it was multiple sclerosis, but doctors had found nothing physically wrong. One doctor had even suggested it might be hysteria or conversion disorder—names given for physical symptoms that seemed to be based in emotional troubles.

With no other explanation, Crichton had accepted it as psychosomatic, or "somatization of psychological stress." He had gone on with his life, and his symptoms vanished six months later as mysteriously as they had appeared.

Through reading about Crichton's background and experiencing her own ability to manifest symptoms, Allie had developed a strong belief that the mind was linked to the body in subtle, less conscious ways that her medical training hadn't prepared her to understand. If she didn't address some psychological trouble, her body would speak. If she buried anger or sadness, her lower back might spasm, causing excruciating pain, or a dull ache might develop in her abdomen.

Sometimes, Allie's psychosomatic symptoms had resolved in anticipation of an intervention. The wart on her knee had gone away before the dermatologist could freeze it off. The tightness in her back had unwound before she visited a physical therapist.

Had Allie enhanced these tendencies during the healing ceremony? Had she unlocked some latent gift?

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Later that night in Allie's apartment, Olivia listened as

Allie told her everything that had happened. As Allie had expected, though, she didn't believe a word of it.

Olivia topped off Allie's glass of wine. "So, when do you start levitating and speaking in tongues?"

Allie rolled her eyes. "I'm not possessed! I'm just saying it wasn't skill that saved our patient's life today." She bit her lip. "It was something else."

"This false modesty is unbecoming. We all know you're a rock-star surgeon."

Allie frowned and scanned the kitchen. She needed to demonstrate the power for her friend. It was the only way Olivia would be convinced.

"What's wrong?" Olivia asked.

Allie walked across the kitchen and pushed a shoulder against the refrigerator. "I just need to find—"

A centipede flitted across the kitchen floor.

Olivia shrieked, leaning back in her seat and jerking her knees up toward her chest. "It's your damn basement! It's so damp, it's a breeding ground for these devilish creatures. Call your landlord and get that taken care of." She pulled out her cell phone.

"Wait."

The centipede had darted to the center of the floor and stopped. Allie tiptoed to a cabinet and pulled out a glass. As she moved toward the insect, she flipped the glass over in her hands, and the centipede remained motionless. Lunging, Allie covered the insect with the glass.

"Gotcha!"

The bug scurried back and forth, butting up against the glass.

Olivia squinted and stuck out her tongue in revulsion. "It has so many legs. *Too* many legs!"

Allie grabbed a sheet of paper and slid it beneath the glass. Then she slipped her hand beneath the paper, keeping the glass sealed as she lifted it from the ground.

"I need to show you something."

Olivia quivered in her chair. "Don't come near me with that beast!" As Allie placed the paper and glass on the table, Olivia shook her head. "That's officially your side of the table."

“Watch carefully.” Allie stared at the centipede and whispered, “Freeze.” When the centipede stopped moving, she lifted the glass away.

“Allie!” Olivia screamed.

“Don’t worry. It’s dead.” Allie shook the table, but the centipede didn’t move.

Olivia leaned in closer. “Did you poison it?”

“No, I killed it.” Allie cleared her throat. “With, well . . . my mind.”

Olivia tilted her head. “I’m going to need a few more glasses of wine before—”

“Watch this.” Allie covered the centipede with the glass again. “Awake.”

The centipede sprung to life and flitted across the paper.

Allie explained that as hard as it might be to believe, something miraculous must have happened in Peru. Allie now had the power to give and take life with her mind.

Olivia brushed her face with her hand, clearly having trouble with the information. “Didn’t I tell you not to go to the Amazon to deal with depression?”

“Nothing was working, Olivia. I was desperate. The pain was always there.”

“You mean *Vera* was always there.”

Allie nodded. “That ceremony allowed me to finally look directly at her.”

“But so many things could’ve gone wrong—and something did *indeed* go wrong.” Olivia scratched her chin. “Maybe the ayahuasca triggered a psychotic break.”

“Come on, Olivia.”

Leaving the kitchen, Olivia grabbed a massive red textbook from a shelf in the living room—the DSM-IV, a reference for psychiatric disorders.

Allie followed her. “What are you doing?”

Olivia skimmed the index, then flipped the book open to the page she was looking for. She dropped it on the coffee table with a thud.

Allie read the headline of the section she’d opened the book to. “Dissociative identity disorder?” She grimaced. “You think I have a split personality?”



“What some might consider demonic possession is considered dissociative identity disorder in some psychiatric circles.”

“No, something happened in the rainforest, Olivia. I can’t explain it, and it’s not in that book. You saw what happened, didn’t you?”

Olivia folded her arms across her chest, appearing stumped. Then she shook her head, walked to the closet, and grabbed her jacket. “Let’s go.”

“Go where? It’s the middle of the night.”

“To the hospital. We’ll use all the tools at our disposal to figure out what’s going on with your brain.”

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In an exam room in the neurosurgical department, Allie reclined within an MRI machine while Olivia controlled the imaging machine from an adjacent room.

Through a speaker, her friend instructed, “Okay, Al, try to get yourself in a centipede state of mind.”

Though the tight space was making her anxious, Allie closed her eyes and took a deep breath, allowing her shoulders to release some tension.

“No lesions in your brain. That’s good,” Olivia commented.

“Did you examine the temporal lobe?”

“First place I checked. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

Allie thought for a moment. “Maybe this thing doesn’t originate in the brain. Maybe it’s in the mind.”

“Could be the default mode network—the part that’s active when we’re daydreaming. Maybe you’re using it to a fuller capacity?”

Allie exhaled slowly. “Maybe we’re looking at this too much like scientists?”

“How else should we be looking at it?”

“What if the problem is spiritual? Like a spiritual disease?”

“You’re not about to go all Deepak Chopra on me, are you?”

“This isn’t a bad spirit, and maybe it isn’t a structural issue or a physical disease,” Allie said. “It’s a sign of deeper, unresolved issues. And maybe if I bring what is

troubling me into conscious awareness, this power—*this pain*—will go away.”

Allie thought about her father and his fading memory. When she'd visited for Christmas last year, Dad had retrieved a book and shown it to her. It had been a collection of Allie's published scientific papers. He'd read every paper, yet when he showed it to her, he asked her why he was only seeing it for the first time.

It was crushing to see him so forgetful, so dependent on others to help him remember where he was and who he was. But Allie's pain went beyond her father's dementia. She was that quivering rabbit because of Vera. If only she could let go of the guilt, maybe she could rid herself of this power.

Suddenly, an announcement rang out over the hospital intercom: Code Blue.

Allie twitched.

“Come on.” Olivia skipped into a jog.

Olivia led Allie down the long corridor and used her key card to access the intensive care unit. They rounded a corner, and Olivia opened a door to an exam room. Inside, Dr. Simpson stood at the patient's bedside, leading the code by shouting orders at a group of nurses.

Olivia watched as the team worked. “Should we help?”

Allie scanned the room and shook her head. “They've got everything handled.”

She knew the patient's history. A year before, Dr. Simpson had removed a tumor from the man's brain, but the cancer had come back, and the second operation hadn't gotten everything. Most doctors, Allie included, thought the man was terminal.

Just then, Dr. Simpson shook his head. He tapped the shoulder of the nurse who was compressing the patient's chest. “Stop compressions. I'm calling it.”

One by one, the doctors and nurses quietly left the room. As Dr. Simpson walked past Allie, he shrugged. “You win some; you lose some.”

Visibly upset, Olivia said she wanted to stay behind to check the patient's chart before he was brought to the morgue. The room cleared out, leaving only Olivia and

Allie. Olivia approached the patient's bed and motioned for Allie to join her.

Olivia raised her eyebrows. "If you really have this power, why not try—"

"No, absolutely not." Allie shook her head, not budging.

"What's the point of having this thing if you're not going to use it?"

"This isn't a game, Olivia."

"Don't you think it's significant that a doctor got this power?"

Allie chewed on her lip, conflicted. It was beyond unethical to do what Olivia was suggesting, yet her nerves were still frayed over the triggering code. She thought of Vera and how she hadn't been able to save her. Why not save this man?

"Fine," Allie said. "I'll try."

She stepped closer to the patient's bedside and wrapped her hands around the patient's lifeless fingers. She inhaled deeply and closed her eyes.

"What are you going to say?"

Allie exhaled. "Breathe."

Suddenly, the patient twitched. Then his back contorted, and he inhaled a massive gulp of air. Allie and Olivia stepped back in awe—and horror.

"Oh my God, what did I just do?"

Dr. Simpson flew through the door, mumbling to himself. "Those nurses always forget to—" He stopped short, looking surprised to see Allie and Olivia beside the patient's bed. His eyes grew wide when he saw the patient flexing his fingers. "What in God's name happened here?"

Olivia turned toward Allie and shrugged. "Magic."

Allie ran out of the room without saying anything. Olivia followed as Allie sprinted down a hallway and burst into the hospital garden.

Olivia caught up to her. "Allie, wait!"

"That was *not* okay, Olivia," Allie said, out of breath. "I just messed with something no person should mess with."

"You just gave that man the best thing a doctor could give a patient: time. He always talked about wanting to see

his daughter get married. Now he might be able to see that happen.”

Allie thought about the countless ethical questions. “Where does it end? Should I bring others back? And how would I decide who to use it on?”

Allie shuddered as she considered the flip side: the ability to take life. If she had had this power the night Vera passed, she could’ve brought her back. It was a horrifying thought. This “power” was a burden. A curse. And she needed to get rid of it.

“I’m going back.”

“I agree; let’s go. My shift starts in—”

“To the rainforest,” Allie clarified. “To see the shaman again.”

Olivia breathed deeply. “Maybe you should just stop all this self-analysis. Why continue examining your pain? Maybe this thing will just go away.”

“No, I can’t just forget what happened with Vera or push it aside. And this power—whatever it is—isn’t going away. I left something unfinished in Peru. If I don’t deal with it, I’ll be living with this pain, and this power, for the rest of my life.”

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Back in the rainforest camp in Iquitos, Allie found Matteo sitting cross-legged near the river, smoking a cigar. Without turning, he blew out smoke and addressed Allie.

“I knew your healing journey wasn’t over, but I didn’t expect you to come back.”

“Something happened after the ceremony, Matteo.” Allie cleared her throat. “Something . . . strange . . .”

Matteo reached for a leaf and cupped his hand around a colorful caterpillar, which crawled onto his fingers. Holding his hand out to Allie, he dropped the caterpillar on her palm and nodded at her. “Go ahead.”

Allie knew what Matteo was asking her to do. He knew about the power. Had he once had it himself? Either way, if the shaman were to help her, Allie knew she needed to show him she was afflicted.

Allie closed her eyes and barely breathed a word. When she opened her hand, the caterpillar was still. Then,

without closing her eyes or saying anything, she willed the insect alive. The caterpillar twitched and scurried to the edge of her hand. It tumbled to the ground and disappeared beneath blades of grass.

“The spirit attached to you that night,” Matteo said.

“What is it?”

“We don’t know, but we’ve seen it attach to those who are in the most pain.”

“Is it evil?”

Matteo pulled at his cigar. “It’s beyond good and evil.”

“I don’t want it. It’s more power than any person should have.”

“You may be right.”

“What happened during my ceremony, Matteo? You were supposed to protect me.”

“I tried. I swear, I tried to protect you. But the spirit was too powerful. It was beyond my abilities.”

“Or maybe my trauma was too strong for you.”

“You were very vulnerable that night.”

“You asked me to kill that caterpillar. That means you . . . ?”

Matteo nodded. “When I first came here, I, too, was very vulnerable to this spirit.”

“But you were able to get rid of it?”

Matteo took a puff off his cigar and nodded.

“Please tell me how.”

“You will have to be very brave.”

Allie shivered at the thought of living with this power forever. “I’ll do whatever I need to do. Go as deep as it takes. Look the trauma right in the eye.”

Matteo stood and motioned for Allie to follow him. He led her onto a muddy path, and they meandered through the dense rainforest. He looked up at the sunlight poking faintly through the canopy above.

“How much of my story do you know?”

“I know you used to live in the United States. San Francisco, I think.”

Matteo nodded. “You’d probably be surprised to know I was an advertising executive. I was pretty good at it too. Had clients from all around the world. Had more money

than I knew what to do with.”

Allie sidestepped a large mud puddle. “What happened?”

“I was miserable. I tried so many medications and interventions to relieve my depression. But I couldn’t find relief with Western medicine. Like you, I began to seek relief from nontraditional sources. I came to Peru to try ayahuasca.”

“And that’s when . . . the spirit attached?”

“Yes. I was very scared at first, but with my shaman’s help, I was finally able to break free of it. That healing experience is part of the reason I decided to stay here.”

“Why ayahuasca?”

“Because it made me feel better the first time. I didn’t just have mental health problems, you see. I had thyroid disease, which made me tired all the time. I’d even had my thyroid removed, but that didn’t treat the underlying disease. I was too sick to work, so I did something radical: I quit my job and came to Peru to understand the true nature of my problems. I found a healer here who has since passed. I took a workshop with him and then apprenticed for several years. I eventually realized I wasn’t expressing my true self in the United States. I was a healer who hadn’t found his path yet. Now, I’m on the right path.”

Matteo’s words resonated with Allie. She, too, felt like conventional medicine had failed her. He wasn’t a doctor but a healer. Perhaps he offered a better medicine than she could.

“Ayahuasca called to me,” Matteo admitted. “It has called to you as well, Allie.”

“Can you teach me what you were taught?”

“Yes, but you are not ready.” He placed a hand on Allie’s shoulder. “Before you can heal the pain of others, you must finish healing your own.”

“I’ll do whatever you think I should. I can’t continue living like this.”

The following morning, Allie lay on a wooden table at Matteo’s request, resting her head on a pillow.

“We’re going to engage in a therapy known as

tapping,” Matteo declared.

“I don’t remember seeing that in my medical textbooks.”

Matteo chuckled. “It’s an alternative therapy aimed at releasing buried emotions. I’ll ask you to recall traumatic memories while I physically tap areas on your face that correlate with meridian points.”

“What’s it supposed to do?”

“It helps you become aware of unconscious emotions and release them.”

Matteo asked Allie to choose a painful event to focus on for the session. She chose Vera, of course.

“I’m going to tap twelve areas twice—each of your eyebrows, the outside of each eye, under your nose, your chin, both sides of your collarbone, and each of your underarms. As I tap, I want you to say, ‘Even though I have guilt surrounding Vera, I deeply and completely accept myself,’ and ‘Even though I couldn’t save Vera that night, I deeply and completely accept myself.’”

As Matteo tapped each place he’d mentioned, Allie repeated the phrases again and again.

“Even though I couldn’t save Vera, I deeply and completely accept myself.”

As Matteo continued tapping, Allie closed her eyes. She was transported back to the exam room where Vera had died. Her emaciated body lay motionless in the hospital bed. A deep well of sadness rose within Allie, and she began weeping.

“Keep going, Allie. You’re doing great.”

Matteo’s words and touch were gentle and caring, triggering a sense of calm within her. Remarkable. Allie had access to the best health care in the world, yet she found comfort not in any technology or cutting-edge intervention but in the nurturing care of a rainforest shaman.

After the session, Allie felt like something had been dislodged. She speculated that it wasn’t the striking of the meridian points that had made her feel better, but rather the speaking aloud of emotions that had been troubling her beneath conscious awareness.

As Allie left for her bungalow, Matteo encouraged her to sit with her emotions and dwell in the happiest memories she had of Vera.

Once in bed, Allie flipped through pictures on her phone. She paused on one image of her and Vera at their family's beach house on Martha's Vineyard. Vera looked healthy: a normal weight, rosy cheeks, her face bright with joy. Their arms were wrapped around their smiling parents. They hadn't known then how much pain was to come. They had taken such happy times for granted.

Over the next few days, Allie and Matteo spent time unearthing painful memories as they walked forest paths, cooked, and canoed down the river. Allie wanted to do another ayahuasca ceremony, but Matteo was adamant she wasn't ready yet. There was too much she still needed to discover within her subconscious.

At Matteo's request, Allie meditated in the morning and before bed. She knew the basic science of meditation and its potential healing benefits. A rheumatologist she knew hadn't been able to relieve the pain a certain patient had been experiencing from lupus. On a whim, the doctor had referred the patient to mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), which had been scientifically proven to reduce anxiety, depression, and some pain conditions. Allie had never forgotten what the doctor had told her.

"MBSR didn't cure my patient's pain, but the pain no longer ruled their life."

After several days of meditation, Allie realized she had seldom felt calm or peaceful because of her chaotic mind. She was always preoccupied with plans or anxieties. Her mind controlled her. At any moment, a painful memory could crop up, and she'd be swept into it, lost in the reverie, a prisoner of her mental activity. After only a week of meditating twice daily, Allie felt like she was more in control of her mind, less vulnerable to letting her thoughts take her emotions for a ride.

At the healing center, Matteo led Allie through a gentle form of massage called craniosacral therapy. "It eases tension in the bones and muscles of your head, neck, back, spinal column, and the sacrum, thereby lowering



stress levels.”

Matteo moved around Allie’s body, expertly placing his hands on the tightest areas. Tension melted from her neck and shoulders.

“Allie, you could become a healer if you wanted.”

“You know I’m a doctor, right?”

Matteo nodded. “A patient comes to you with a brain tumor, and you remove it. They are fixed, but are they healed? Have you addressed why they developed the tumor?”

“The development of cancer—any disease, in fact—is multifaceted. It’s often driven by one’s biology—one’s genes and the predispositions one may have.”

“Indeed, but why are those genes expressed? What causes them to turn on? Isn’t it true you could have a genetic predisposition for a certain disease but never have it manifest without the appropriate conditions?”

“That might be correct. It’s often uncertain what triggers a patient’s illness.”

“Could it be stress? Emotional troubles? Unaddressed trauma that disrupts our mental activity and changes the chemistry of our bodies, causing the release of stress hormones that tip the balance toward disease?”

Allie couldn’t argue. “I guess that’s what we’re doing here?”

Matteo nodded as he gently slid one hand beneath Allie’s neck.

“My whole life, I’ve wanted to help people,” Allie acknowledged. “And what you do here seems to offer a powerful path toward healing. But I can’t just throw away a Harvard education and become some rainforest healer.”

Matteo instructed Allie to flip onto her stomach. He pressed both hands to Allie’s upper back. Her back warmed beneath the touch. “Why not?”

“I’d be a joke among my colleagues! They’d think I was delusional. That I was joining an industry full of self-help gurus and snake-oil salesmen.”

“And what would you think?”

“I would most likely agree with them. But I’d also be curious to learn other methods of helping people get

better.”

A few days later, Allie was drinking coffee by the river as she thought of Vera: all the agony her sister had suffered over many months because of her chronic illness; the countless specialists she'd visited; the hospitalizations, exams, and surgeries she'd undergone to diagnose her or treat her disease.

A few days before she passed, Vera had asked Allie to do something. “I can't spend more time in hospitals, Allie. No more doctors. No more surgeries or procedures. Please give me something. Please help me stop this.”

The request had been Vera's last resort. Death would've ended her physical and existential pain, but Allie thought there had to be another way to help. She had squeezed Vera's hand. “We'll get through this.”

Days later, the hospital had called late at night to inform the family that Vera's heart had stopped. They had been able to resuscitate her, and they were calling to verify whether they should continue resuscitating her if her heart stopped again.

“Resuscitate?” Allie's father had asked, confused. “What do you mean?”

Allie had grabbed the phone from his hand. “Continue, goddamn it!”

By the time they had arrived at the hospital, Vera was a vegetable.

Allie had demanded to see Vera's chart. One detail on it continued to haunt Allie: Vera had awakened while being resuscitated. That must have been terrifying for her.

Sitting by the river, Allie pictured Vera lying dead in the hospital bed: Her slim fingers clenched into fists. Her ribs bruised and broken. A tube holding her jaw open.

A salamander on the riverbank caught Allie's attention. She narrowed her eyes and projected her pain onto the creature, aiming to kill it, but the salamander didn't die. It leaped from the muddy shore into the brown water.

Allie pointed a clenched fist at where the salamander had disappeared into the water and shouted, “Die!”

A second later, the salamander bobbed to the surface,

floating on its back.

Later that evening, Allie told Matteo she'd experienced a delay in her "power."

"That's a good sign. You're opening up, becoming less emotionally blocked. I believe the spirit can only hold onto pain."

"And without the pain, it might have to move on?"

"That's the idea."

The following morning, Matteo led Allie through an analysis of her dreams, which she'd been recording in a notebook for weeks. They were searching for possible connections to her waking life.

"When you start picking apart your dreams, your mind shies away from it. If you stick with it long enough, your mind will submit and reveal its secrets."

To start, Allie told Matteo about a reoccurring dream that terrified her. "I'm an astronaut moving along the side of a space station with a colleague. Suddenly, the other astronaut becomes untethered and starts floating away."

"What happens then?"

"I'm still attached to the station by a cable, so I push toward them. When I get close, I reach my arms toward their outstretched hand. I get so close, but they're always just out of reach."

"Do you know this other astronaut?"

"I can never see their face."

"What do you think you want in this dream?"

Allie thought about it. "I want to grab the astronaut's hand."

"Keep exploring the dream for meaning."

As Allie took her morning walk the next day, she felt lighter.

Referring to Hippocrates's belief that walking was the best medicine, Matteo had encouraged her to establish a walking routine. He urged her to reflect and deliberate problems as she walked. Though exercise had many health benefits, such as lifting one's mood, Allie had never previously practiced the deliberate rumination Matteo had prescribed. Now, she strolled the rainforest each morning, deep in thought.

During that morning's walk, she came across a snake lying dead on the path and slowed to a halt. She pointed a finger at the snake's lifeless body. "Slither." When the snake didn't move, Allie repeated the word, but again, nothing happened.

Frustrated, Allie shouted, "Slither!"

The snake twitched to life and slithered across the forest floor.

Days later, Allie underwent another session of craniosacral therapy.

"Your energy is much calmer than it was during our first session. When we first met, your aura was only around your head. Now, it surrounds your entire body and radiates outward."

Allie didn't know whether to attribute it to the treatments, the meditation, the journaling, the dream analyses, or the walking, but Matteo was right. She'd never felt more grounded.

Allie laid face down, and Matteo pressed lightly against her lower back.

"I've been thinking about depression," Allie whispered.

"How so?"

"In the West, depression is just a chemical imbalance. And sure, certain chemicals are imbalanced when someone is in a depressive state, but that's a result, not the cause. Depression is a signal—an alarm bell—telling us something needs to change."

Matteo instructed Allie to flip onto her back.

"My depression was a teacher," Matteo agreed. "It taught me I was ignoring something I desperately needed to address."

When the session ended, Matteo kept his hand beneath Allie's head. He smiled. "I think you're ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Another ayahuasca ceremony. But this time, it'll be different."

"How so?"

"This time, you'll learn how to prepare the ayahuasca."

Allie was reading in her room later when her phone rang. The caller ID showed it was her father. She

hesitated. Would he be lucid? Would he remember the anger he had toward her for not saving Vera?

Allie swung her legs over the edge of the bed and answered. "Dad?"

"Allie, hi." His voice was upbeat, almost cheery. "How are you?"

"Hi, Dad, I'm fine. Is everything okay?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm traveling."

"Please come home, Allie."

"I can't yet, Dad. There's still something I need to do."

"Well, please try to come home for Christmas, will you? It makes me happy to see you and Vera together underneath the same roof."

Allie's stomach dropped. There was so much she wanted to say, but she couldn't find the words. She wanted to remind him Vera was gone. She wanted to tell him she was sorry she hadn't been able to save her that night. She wanted her father to say Vera's death wasn't her fault and that she didn't need to carry the guilt any longer.

A bell chimed, indicating it was dinnertime. "Dad, I need to go. But I'll come home for Christmas dinner, okay?"

"That sounds great, Al. Please take care of yourself."

As Allie ended the call, she burst into tears. She ran out of the bungalow toward the river. Once she reached the shore, she screamed as loud as she could.

Between sobs, the despair turned to anger. She scanned the water and spotted what looked to be a school of piranhas just below the surface. Squinting, she pointed at the fish. "Float."

She searched the water's surface for activity. Nothing.

"Float!" she yelled. "Float! Float! Float!"

Still nothing. Had she lost her powers?

Footsteps approached from behind her, and Allie spun around to see Matteo, tears in his eyes. He walked over and wrapped his arms around her.

"Tell me what's wrong, Allie."

"I don't know!" Allie cried out. "I'm in so much pain. I

lost my sister. And now, I'm slowly losing my dad."

"If your dad were here, what would you wish he could say to you?"

"That I did my best? I don't know. That he's not mad at me. That even though I couldn't save Vera, he still loves me. That everything's going to be okay."

Lost in the fog of dementia and still believing Vera was alive, her dad would never be able to say those things, but it felt good to say them aloud. If she couldn't get absolution from her dad, she'd have to get what she needed from herself.

Matteo rubbed Allie's back. "It may sound cheesy, Allie, but it's not about other people forgiving you; it's about you forgiving yourself. And if you can't get there, at least come to terms with there being nothing more you could have done."

According to something Matteo had once told Allie, his shaman had taught him that the shaman's healing practice wasn't just about using plants to promote healing through inward exploration. The most powerful healing practices involved an outward, social journey. Connecting with others was just as healing as ayahuasca.

And that's what Matteo had given Allie. He'd spent the last few weeks listening to Allie and letting her story come alive in his mind so she didn't feel so alone with her pain. With him, she felt seen.

In Matteo's embrace, Allie finally realized why Vera had been so angry with her in the hospital. Vera hadn't wanted to be poked and prodded anymore. She'd wanted to go peacefully and on her own terms. But Allie had kept forcing specialists and interventions on her sister.

Why?

Allie hadn't been able to help herself! She was a doctor with a mandate to help the sick. If there was a problem, she fixed it. If someone had a brain tumor, she took it out. If her sister were sick, she'd find a way to help her. Anything short of solving the problem was a medical failure. A failure of the doctor.

Allie's failure.

"I didn't listen to her!" Allie shouted. "She didn't need

another doctor. She just needed me to let go. But I couldn't. I was always trying to save her. I watched her waste away. And now I'm watching my dad waste away too. I couldn't do anything for Vera, and I can't do anything for him."

Matteo stepped back and looked into Allie's eyes. "Sometimes, there isn't anything we can do, Allie. When there's nothing we can do, we have to let go."

"I couldn't let go." Tears welled in her eyes. "I still can't."

"It's the hardest thing to accept, but some things in life are incomprehensible. Some things remain a mystery no matter how hard we try to figure them out."

Allie wiped her eyes and nodded. She knew Matteo was right.

"The hardest thing for me to accept is that some things are beyond my control," Allie said. "Beyond the limits of medical science. Beyond *my* limits. As a physician. As a sister. As a daughter."

Behind her, Allie just made out the *glub* of something breaking the surface of the water. Then a frenzied splashing erupted, and she knew the piranhas were feasting.

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Matteo swung a machete at the dense vegetation ahead of them to clear a path. Allie followed, carrying a ladder in one hand.

She wiped sweat from her forehead. "How long until we get there?"

"It's not much farther."

"Do I really need to learn how to make ayahuasca?"

"Think of it as one more tool in your doctor's bag."

Finally pausing in a clearing, Matteo examined a tall tree with green leaves and took the ladder from Allie. He stood the ladder against the tree.

"Two plants are needed to make the ayahuasca brew: the *chacrana* leaf, which contains the natural psychedelic, DMT, and the ayahuasca vine, which protects the DMT from being metabolized before it can activate."

Allie held the base of the ladder, as Matteo climbed

and used his machete to hack at the tree's branches.

Hours later, he showed Allie how to combine the leaves and vines in a large pot heating over a fire. When the brew was ready, Matteo handed her a ladle, which she used to fill her cup with the brown liquid. Then he led her to the healing center, where she sat on a cushion, crossing one leg beneath the other.

When Matteo nodded at Allie, she took a deep breath and gulped down the bitter liquid. He rested a hand on her shoulder. "Tonight, go to Vera."

For the first twenty minutes, Allie felt relaxed, like she was floating lazily on her back in a quiet pond. Then she groaned as the world began to crumble beneath her. Nausea turned her stomach, and she tasted bile. Retching, she grabbed the bucket next to her and vomited into it. She rocked back and forth as reality swirled.

"Don't fight," Matteo whispered. "Surrender. Go toward the pain."

Matteo helped her stand and led her to a yoga mat so she could lie on her back. As soon as she was horizontal, the ayahuasca slammed into Allie with the force of a hurricane.

The night Vera had asked her to help her die came rushing back.

Vera's eyes were sunken and dark with hopelessness. "Help me, Allie, please. If you love me, help me end this."

Allie couldn't meet her eyes. "Vera . . . I can't . . ."

Vera exploded in anger. "You can't help?" She pointed to the door. "Fine! Get out of here and don't ever come back."

Another wave of nausea overwhelmed Allie, and she vomited into the bucket. The scent of smoke blew over her, and Matteo began singing, filling the healing center with his deep voice.

Allie floated over the intensive care room. Doctors and nurses were resuscitating Vera. One doctor stood over her, compressing her chest with both hands. Another charged a defibrillator, called "Clear," and once the others had stood back, delivered a shock to restart her heart. The team watched the EKG machine, but the rhythm had



flatlined.

Allie threw up again. Matteo sung louder.

Allie stood before the doctor who had told her the they'd been able to resuscitate Vera, but she no longer had any brain function.

"I want to see her," she pleaded. "I don't want her to be alone in there. Please, I just want to hold her hand."

Allie emptied her stomach again.

Matteo's singing faltered. "Go to Vera, Allie."

Allie was attached to the space station from the dream she hadn't been able to escape since Vera's death—a dream that felt like it had been surgically implanted in her brain. Allie was tethered to the space station, while the other astronaut floated, unattached, a few hundred feet away in the inky-black sky above Earth.

Vera's voice sounded in her headset. "I'm floating away, Allie."

"Vera!"

Allie tugged on the cable to make sure it was secure, and then she pushed off in Vera's direction. She was only a foot from Vera's outstretched hand when her cord pulled taut.

"No, no!" Allie reached with all her might. "Vera, I'm sorry. I can't reach you."

Vera smiled through the visor. "It's okay, Allie."

"I tried everything! But I just made it worse." Allie sobbed. "Maybe if I weren't your sister, you'd still be alive."

"You go too far, Allie. So much was beyond your control."

Anger and sadness welled up within Allie, and she decided to make one last effort. She unclipped from her cable.

"What are you doing, AI?"

"I can't let you go again!"

Allie held the end of the cable with one hand and reached toward Vera with her other. Their hands touched at last, and Allie wrapped her fingers around Vera's wrist. They were face-to-face. The glass of their visors touched.

Vera held Allie's gaze. "You have to let me go."

Allie shook her head. "No! I'm never letting you go."

“What happened wasn’t anyone’s fault. Not the doctors’, not the hospital’s, and certainly not yours.”

Back in the healing center, Allie lay flat on the mat. Tears streamed down her face.

To her sister, Allie shouted, “I’m sorry, Vera. I’m so, so sorry!”

Vera smiled. Always edgy, Vera almost never smiled that way. She looked so sweet, like a child. Like someone forgiving a sister.

“You’ve got to let me go now.”

It was what everyone had been saying all along. Allie needed to accept that in life, some things happened that defied explanation. She needed to let go of the guilt she’d clung to since Vera’s death. She could let her go and still love her.

Allie mustered a nod within her helmet. “I love you, Vera.”

“Love you too, Sis. Do something for me, Allie?”

Allie sniffled. “Anything.”

“So many people suffer in this world. You can help them heal.”

“I will.” Allie knew it was her destiny to practice a new kind of medicine.

Over Vera’s shoulder, Allie watched a gigantic, yellow sun rise, but it didn’t sting her eyes to look at. Allie exhaled heavily and opened her hand, releasing her sister. Vera smiled softly as she floated away.

A beam of light pulsed from Allie’s chest, aimed at Vera. Vera opened her arms, and the beam entered her chest, merging with her body.

Time seemed to accelerate as Vera floated away from Allie. Faster and faster, she navigated toward the sun. Then there was a tiny splash of orange, as Vera fell into the bright star and vanished.

In the healing center, Allie opened her eyes.