

Chapter One

October, 1948

Emma Trent stepped off the liner's gangplank and walked into fire.

She remembered the rain on the deck as the ship left port weeks ago, drumming over and over like a bored classmate's fingers on a desk. The sound of the rain had burned itself into her head. The sound of London, then of Dorset, when the bombs weren't falling. She'd only seen a bomb a few times, tearing a great hole into the flesh of the world, but the noise and the stink of them still festered in her head.

The noise of the bombs was long years dead now though. This was the other side of the world, the rain cauterized out of the sky. There were seabirds everywhere, following the fishing boats still out at sea like twists of white silk fluttering from the lance of a knight in a fairy story. They were the only clouds Emma had seen in a week, so deep was this world into its summertime. She stared at them, and then she stared at everything else, so bright and vibrant, the colours of the world all but dancing with how new they were. It was roughly at this point where she tripped on the edge of the gangplank and bounced off the back of a briefly confused sailor.

This was life in a city. Well, it was and it wasn't. To Emma, a city was a cold, grey thing, with people crashing together like waves with dingy buildings looming overhead, each one a fat crow looking for mice in a field. This place wasn't like any city she'd ever known before. It felt more like a village, from what she'd seen so far. There was just a lot more of it, and a lot more people in it, which was the best thing (and if you asked her, the only really good thing) about living in a city at all. There were so many people, so many lives, so many stories they could tell. A kind of mass, communal beauty, a living beauty, like the wingbeats of a flock of starlings. You could find it almost anywhere, if you knew where and how to look, but it was easiest to find in a city landscape. That beauty was a little clearer here, if only for the sun being brighter and not hoarded away by a held-down pillow of dark grey clouds.

Emma still had her little suitcase in her hand, the one she'd been evacuated with. It wasn't exactly the prettiest case in the world, or the most expensive, or the least covered in weird scratch marks from when the farmhouse cats had decided it was their collective mortal enemy, but it was her thing, and hers alone, which is always a big thing for anyone young who grew up with very little. It was a thin layer of leather over a sturdy base of probably-cardboard and had once been brown somewhere underneath the constellation of beige-white scars. The name tag was still there, though the paper had been folded and generally mangled over the years. Miss Trent, 21 Kirby Street, Bethnal Green, Aged 6³/₄, the final fraction written in a rounded child's hand, her hand, spidery from the shaking of the train. So was the little drawing of a flower just underneath it. The name, her name, had been smudged into damp illegibility but it was still there in her heart and head. The house had been bombed out during the war, the whole seething rookery had been stamped flat, but she was still here. She treated it like an ancient artefact dug out of a faraway pyramid or lost city of gold. The address was nothing. The name was everything.

She was one of those girls who could sort of go on autopilot, going through the motions of what needed to be done whilst her mind was entirely elsewhere. Back in England, in this case. Back in Dorset, with the smell of wet grass and apples and occasionally a sheep that'd been ill. The wind through green fields, carrying birdsong on its back. Sweet sugar smells in the larder, always accompanied by that unique frisson of terror you get when your mother stores the almost identical-looking rat poison from your dad's work next to it and can be a trifle absent-minded. The long nights out among the stars and starlings, watching them wheel and dance above the fading orange sunsets with the sky above them turning indigo and letting faraway light shine on and through her. There were happy memories, but this was better. This had to be better. Otherwise why would they be here?

It was a few hours before they really got underway on the last stretch of their journey. Emma loved a city but her father had other plans, a plot of land in the burnt-red countryside of this burnt-red country. They'd build there. Build a new home, a new life. It was the getting there that'd be the hardest part, even as they waited in the dusty immigration office with everyone else from the boat, young children screeching as they ran around the building like they'd ran around the decks, not caring about the change or seeming to even register that it had happened. *Kids are a resilient bunch*, the barely-sixteen Emma thought to herself. *Come boats or bombs or interminable paperwork, give them a moment to run around and play and all seems forgiven. Seems, anyway. Maybe we just lost sight of what really hurt us when we were young, and that's why a big man can take off his big leather belt in front of a boy half his height with a pinched face and fingers like boning knives and later say to his friends with a straight face that it never did him any harm –*

Her dad was back and beckoning them up, holding a sheaf of forms tied together with string and toggles like an old man's coat in one hand and their passports fanned out in the other like a hand of cards. Emma smiled and picked up her suitcase, helped her mother with the other one, and waited. Eventually the big man from the immigration department got up and rounded his desk. Emma couldn't help flinching at that. The man was vast, built like a grain barn and to about the same dimensions. He looked at the three of them, all assembled. He took in Emma's pinstriped victory trouser suit (it was cheap to get and even pencil skirts generally managed to get stuck in things), close cut hair (an incident with a tractor had put paid to any desire to wear her hair long), her height and build, and stuck out his hand.

"Welcome to Australia, son," he said.

"Did you really have to laugh that hard, Mum?"

"Are you still on about – well, I suppose you are, dear. It was that or slap him, and you know that would just have made things worse."

"All violence ever does is make things worse, Caroline."

"Case in point, it'll set your father off."

“And it’s not just physical violence either,” Greg continued, seemingly oblivious, “it’s political violence, economic violence, there’s all sorts of ways for–”

“Eyes on the road, Greg, for goodness’ sake!”

“Sorry, dear.”

It sounded like they were shouting at each other, and this was because they were. They had to. Bombing down a back road at what felt like a hundred miles an hour (but was actually more like half that, loaded down as they were) meant that normal conversation was drowned out by the rasp of the bike’s engine and the tea-clipper creak of what, against all evidence to the contrary, Emma’s dad insisted was suspension. At least they knew it could handle the load. It was an old Army surplus bike, left over from when Greg had been a rat-catcher in the army camps and hauling huge amounts of arsenic and bent metal traps around the West Country. The bike itself was pretty ancient but it all still worked, thanks mostly to Emma and Greg working on and modifying it until it was better than new. This process hadn’t been without its teething problems – both Emma and Greg had been set on fire by intemperate decisions more than once over the course of the rebuilds – but the end result was that the bike could carry everyone and everything in the Trent family basically until the cows came home.

Plus, Emma quite liked how she looked in driving goggles.

The three of them rolled on through the red desert, lumbering through smaller and smaller towns with their home on their backs. The only times they spoke to anyone else on their way through the country was when they had to stop for petrol. Or diesel. Or paraffin. Or just about anything, really. It was Emma’s dad’s considered opinion that only having one option for fuel was far more risky in case supplies of that fuel ran out for whatever reason, and that therefore the sensible thing to do was hammer together an engine that could run on multiple fuel types. It was Emma’s considered opinion, on the other hand, that just because you *could* make a motorcycle run on anything from four-star to stale aircraft fuel that nobody else was using to even bloody coal gas (and hadn’t testing *that* been an experience), you didn’t actually *have* to. Neither did you need to do so at every conceivable opportunity like you were trying to prove you’d done it to onlookers, passers-by, and possibly even yourself.

They chugged out into the wild, and Emma was struck by how green it all seemed, even though she’d not seen it rain once in the days they’d been travelling. That had been a blessing, she supposed; none of them really had anything waterproof to hand, having sold most of it to make the ticket money on the grounds that Australia was an eternal summer. But there were still green places. There were blackberries in numbers that seemed insane to Emma, great choking bushes of them that had spread out from around the big cities of Melbourne and Sydney like the belches of green smoke from a factory chimney. The blackberries might have been everywhere, but the rabbits were everywhere else, bouncing around the place and eating the thick grasses that were everywhere around. They left the blackberries alone for some reason, and Emma wondered if they knew something she didn’t.

They charged on through the bush, leaving the towns behind, until at last they were there. At least, Emma's dad said they were there. Indeed, he didn't say it, but proclaimed it, properly *proclaimed*, like a town crier announcing the crowning of a new king. Emma supposed he had to, because the amount of other signs that they were there or indeed anywhere totalled, to use the technical term, the square root of bugger-all. There were some slightly wobbly-looking trees, and the usual thick grasses, and a supremely disinterested small bear sitting on a branch that looked like it had recently taken a blow to the back of the head, and there was the rust-red earth that the bike had been spraying in clouds from the back wheels all through the trek, but there wasn't anything at all to signify the presence of civilization.

"This is going to be our home here, isn't it?" Emma's mum said. Emma thought she could hear the words "*What the hell have you gotten us into this time, you total idiot,*" but her mother's lips hadn't moved at all as far as she could tell so it must have been in her head.

"Yep!" Greg popped the p sound. "I promised you a fresh start and what could be fresher than this? We can really live here – not browbeaten into deferential immiseration by the pressure of traditions going back centuries! Not huddled in a slum waiting to give half our pay to a landlord we've never met except through the medium of thugs with sticks! Not cowering in an overgrown baked bean tin in the back garden while the Luftwaffe bombs seven bells out of us! This is freedom, Caroline! This is living!"

Greg's speech was undercut somewhat when the birds started laughing at him.

Chapter Two

November, 1949

Greg had a job, Caroline had her piecework, Emma was looking for something, and they were all still living in the tent.

It was beginning to get to them, if they were honest with themselves, and that was something that only happened when no alternative presented itself. The sweat-slick nights under olive-drab Army surplus canvas were bad enough, but for Emma and Caroline the days were even worse. Greg might have hated his factory job – and he was right to, they supposed, a cement works was an awful place even in Australia – but at least it was something to fill his day, even if all it filled his day with was thick grey dust. Caroline and Emma were bored into mild insanity, the pair of them talking to themselves far more than they ever spoke to each other, for what was there to talk about? Emma worked like a demon around the campsite doing jobs that didn't really need doing, while Caroline darned shirts and knitted socks and did anything with her hands that meant she wasn't trying to strangle someone. They were fractious when they talked, picking holes in anything the other said, so they simply stayed silent and peaceful as a war grave.

The sun was finally going down, the cracked dirt and bent trees gaining a little respite from the furnace overhead, which meant it would soon be time for dinner and The Argument. There was nothing that could be done about The Argument. It was like leaks on an old ship. There might be ways to beat it back for a time, and everyone worked hard to do them, but it always found a way to sneak tendrils inside and before anyone knew what was happening they were having The Argument all over again, never changing from their positions and never backing down. It was like the dust storms that blew in from up country sometimes. All they could do was ride it out and go back to normal later, whatever normal even meant any more.

The Argument was this: Emma's days were all pretty much identical episodes of sun-bleached domestic servitude in a tent by a stream in an aggressively rural area. Emma would take anything at all over one more day looking at gum trees and listening to birds. It was *maddening* for her. She was a city girl and couldn't understand why her father had decided to set up his family in conditions reminiscent of her own evacuation, but without anything to do or see or even have over their heads at night beyond a reed-thin swatch of old green fabric like a travelling tinker had tried to patch up the sky. Geelong wasn't that far away, about half an hour by clanking army-surplus motorcycle, but that was still a good twenty miles and walking that far meant making a day of it, and she didn't have her own money or transportation or any kind of independence at all that would allow her to do even slightly as she pleased.

Her father countered that they had never had it so good. They had no rent to pay to a faceless landlord and while there might be things they wanted, they had absolutely everything they could conceivably *need*. They were all but self-sufficient, rabbit stew being very good for you, and while his job at the cement factory paid very little, the money that they got went a long way. He would quote the aphorism of Epictetus that wealth was measured in having few wants, and that by such noble standards they were the wealthiest people they knew. He would then argue that were Emma to seek out work, it would cause an untenable amount of stress upon the family. By

not being there to help her mother out with the hou— with the tents, Emma would be throwing her to the wolves; they would both be tired at the end of a long day, and this would inevitably lead to a more fractious existence. And, he would add, would this be in any way improved were the family living wedged together in a slum? They had been immeasurably fortunate to escape the rookeries of London, he said, and he refused entirely to trade one for another.

And on it would go, for hours upon hours, around in circles like two bare-knuckle boxers waiting for the bell to ring, until her mother forced them to stop by going to bed with a headache. The problem was that they both knew the other was right in a few aspects; live in the bush *was* dull for a teenage girl, and not having to budget for rent was far from the worst thing in the world. But the point of The Argument wasn't to have an actual argument. There wasn't any progress being made or new ideas being shared. It was just talking for the sake of talking, to give the frustrations of the days and weeks and months a way to boil over without actually talking about any of them. Perhaps it wasn't healthy and perhaps they weren't being as mature as they ought to be about it, but it was something that kept them at least a little bit stable, and more importantly, it meant nothing ever actually happened.

The thunder of the bike's engine heralded Greg's return, but when he got off the bike he looked very, very different. He'd always been a big man, but he seemed to be standing taller than he had in months. Perhaps, Emma thought, it was that he wasn't bent double coughing up greyish-yellow gunk every couple of minutes. It was more than that, though. It ran deeper through him, whatever this something was, making him more the man he'd used to be, like an old Renaissance masterpiece restored to vibrant greatness by some deft hand.

Then her brain finally caught up with what her eyes were telling her, just as her mother began to scream.

"Gregory Trent, how in God's name are you doing that?"

"God," Greg said, and Emma got a sense that he was quoting someone, "had nothing to do with it. It's the doctor at work. I feel like a new man!"

"What? What the hell are you talking about, Greg?" Caroline was slowly turning grey.

Emma had had enough. "Dad, odd question, humour me, have you looked down lately? Directly down? At your feet?"

"The problem wasn't with my feet, dear," he replied, "it was with my why the blue fuck are my feet not touching the ground."

"Do you get it now?" Emma said, her voice rigid and stern. "Mum's about to keel over, what on Earth has happened to you?"

"Ah."

Greg turned on his heels at the new voice, while Caroline went from grey to a weird shade of puce. “Oh, hello there Doc,” he said with forced and slightly frightened politeness. “You came out of nowhere, haha.”

“He came out of nowhere alright,” Emma said. “I watched you coming up the road, Dad, there wasn’t anybody following you at all.”

“Yes,” said the man. “I’ll go into quite why that is in a moment, if you don’t mind. Now, an unfortunate truth of medicine is that if there are effects to a treatment, there are side-effects. Cough mixture engenders drowsiness, tinctures of laudanum were horribly addictive, et cetera, et cetera. Alas, after this evening’s spinal manipulation, Mr. Trent appears to have contracted a mild case of levitation.”

“A mild case of *what?*” Caroline’s colour began to change again, to the point where Emma’s brain (which was on the verge of a complete breakdown at this point) began wondering whether she was half chameleon.

“Levitation, madam. And indeed it is rather mild, all things considered. The medical literature on the subject is quite clear in that regard. An architect in Port Said developed a much more severe case to the point where he was found bouncing off his bedroom ceiling after being bludgeoned into insensibility by the fan. Of course, it later transpired after some testing that the gentleman in question was quite seriously allergic to gravity, for which Mr. Trent may be grateful he is not – oh dear. If one of you ladies could provide a brace for Mr. Trent, please? He appears to have fainted, and he and I would both appreciate it if he could be restored to the conventional way up.”

Emma’s higher thought processes had now totally switched off, but she still walked over and manoeuvred her dad until he was upright. He was so much lighter when he levitated, which she might have considered a blessing were her brain not doing the equivalent of running in little circles, waving its arms and screaming.

“Ah! Thank you, my dear. What a practical young woman you are. Tell me, have you considered a career in medicine? No, Aidan, now is not the time for a recruitment effort. I have not even had the courtesy to ask your name or introduce myself!”

“Bweebl,” bweebled Greg, who was slowly coming round.

“Er,” mumbled Emma as she leaned back an inch to stop her father’s elbow bouncing off her head, “I’m Emma. Emma Trent. It’s very nice to meet you, Doctor...”

“Bell. Doctor Aidan Bell, of the Ninth Great and Noble Healing Arts Practitioners Society.”

Emma could practically hear the capital letters thumping into place like sledgehammers on a tent peg. Then she thought for a moment. “Wait, that’s the sign above—”

“Above the fish and chip shop on Rose Street, yes, though we do have an office at Plaistow Cement Works, hence my having treated your father.”

Now Emma’s brain was sputtering into life again. “Wait a moment. You’re a doctor.”

“Yes, Ms. Trent, we’ve established that.”

“No, you’re a doctor. You must be trained to deal with,” and here she gestured vaguely at her father, who was now gently spinning in the breeze, “with whatever’s happened to Dad. Why didn’t you do it?”

“Well, for one thing, my consent to lay hands upon your father’s person was given only in the context of his earlier treatment. For another, and this point might in fairness be the more salient one, I am presently speaking to you via astral projection.”

“Astral... excuse me?”

By way of demonstration, Bell waved an arm through Greg’s chest.

“I’m not really here, Ms. Trent. I am in fact in my living room, wherein I am encircled by candles and exotic incense. The procedure is such that you may possibly be able to smell the sandalwood directly even here.”

Emma sniffed. “I’ve got no idea what that smells like, Doctor. Is it normally cats?”

“Cats? What precisely do you mean by – oh. If you will permit a brief absence, Ms. Trent?” The man flickered and disappeared.

Before Emma could muster a cogent response, Bell appeared again. “It is as I thought. An agent of chaos and disorder disrupted proceedings through the use of ghastly and unwholesome chemicals of dubious provenance—”

“Did your cat do its business on your incense, Doctor?”

Bell gave her a penetrating look. Emma might have been fairly brave and hardy for a seventeen-year-old, but she still wilted a little.

“Yes,” he said after a minute. “The cat did indeed do its business on the incense. In his defence, he is old, and his mind is not as it was.”

“And it’s my own damn fault for calling him Mister Tiddles,” Emma heard. “Nominative determinism at its very finest there.”

Before Emma could stop herself, and if her brain had been on anything like its normal level she would have done, she said a few words that would define the rest of her life. They were words, though she did not know it, of the utmost destiny and purpose. They were words that would

shake the foundations of what she knew and would send ripples across time and space. They were the kind of words someone only says once in their lifetime, and sometimes not even that.

“Is your cat *seriously* called Mister Tiddles?”

Bell gaped at her, and vanished.

A moment later, he reappeared, his image shaking slightly. “Tie your old man down to something heavy before he goes to sleep tonight. Use something good and strong, too. Doctor’s orders.”

Then he vanished again.

The next morning, Emma woke up to find her dad clambering down from one of the trees. She wordlessly undid the knots and put the spare guy rope back in the box with the others. Nice and tidy. Nice and neat. Nice and not keeping her dad from floating off during the night. A perfectly normal coil of rope that was in no way smirking at her and could bog off if it kept that up. Which, er, it wasn’t. Obviously.

Because of how normal it was.

“So are we going to talk about last night, then?” Her dad’s voice was quiet, and trying its best to sound gentle. “*Christ I’m worried about you, our kid.*”

“I wonder what’s for breakfast,” she said loudly. “Porridge and blackberry jam, is it? Fantastic! Just what’s needed to set us all up for another normal day!”

“Er, I think this is important.” “*Stay calm, Greg. She’s not taking this well.*”

“A day just like any other! What a day it shall be! I think I’ll do what I always do today. Doesn’t that sound nice?” Emma’s voice was starting to crack at the edges.

“Now you listen here young lady, I’m talking to you!” “*Keep it together, this is hard on everyone and you don’t want to make things worse.*”

Emma turned around and stared at him, eyes bright and brittle as hoarfrost. “You’re not making anything worse, Dad, because it’s already worse! Or weirder, or stranger, or, or something! Yesterday stopped making sense, Dad, and it stopped the moment you got home, Dad, so forgive me, Dad, if I’m trying to cling to anything that does, *Dad!*”

Greg just looked at her. It was all he could do, other than hover four inches above the ground.

“I’m sorry,” she said, after a brief moment of forever.

“It’s okay, pet,” he said back. “It’s difficult.” “*And you knew what I was thinking. Didn’t you?*”

“... But I can’t have. That’s not possible, Dad. Is it?” Emma paused for a moment. “Wait, what am I saying? You’re *floating*. Who knows what’s possible?”

“Doctor Bell does,” said her dad. He didn’t even hesitate.

“You know...” Emma started. Was this another attempt by The Argument to rear its head again? She didn’t know, and then decided that she didn’t care. “He asked if I’d ever thought about going into medicine, Dad.”

“Did he?”

“Yes.” Emma swallowed. “He did. And then he mumbled something about not doing a recruitment pitch right now – well, right then – oh, you know what I mean. Actually you probably don’t, thinking about it, you were unconscious at the time. Am I rambling? I think I might be rambling.”

“Do it.”

“Anyway, I really think it’d be a good idea for me to take him up on this. I know you’re not okay with me working and you want me to go back to school – *I* want me to go back to school – but this would be learning too, right? Learning about something going on in the world, learning how to deal with it, learning how to help.”

“Do it, love.”

“All I’d really need to do is talk to Dr. Bell, and he’d tell me to clear it with you anyway, so I’d much rather go into this knowing that it has your blessing rather than try to keep it from you like I’ve joined a secret order of wizards or something. I just think it could be really helpful and it’d get me out of the hou– get me out of the tent, and I understand if you have some objections but if we could just talk about it rationally and listen to each other, I think it could really work.”

Greg concentrated, his face screwing up. “*Do it, our kid. Please.*”

The words arrived in Emma’s mind, neatly bypassing the gridlock of panic and shakiness to arrive precisely where they were meant to go.

“Okay then,” she replied. “Okay. So. Could I–”

“Hop in the sidecar once you’ve got your good suit on, I’ll give you a lift into work,” said her dad.

The two of them nodded, at roughly the same time, and then they sat down to breakfast. Caroline ladled some porridge into the rough-hewn wooden bowls and sat down near the fire. Up in the gum trees, a kookaburra chirped its morning call. There was a distant reply, further away, somewhere in the trees.

Chapter Three

November, 1949

It was a long drive into the outskirts of Geelong. The bike bounced and growled its way along the dirt roads into town, and Emma thought that it spoke to her dad's hardened up-country spirit that he'd managed to consistently refrain from driving on anything remotely resembling a paved road until he couldn't possibly avoid it. Even with her goggles on, and even though they were designed to keep out the sand and sun of the Sahara desert, she felt like she was about fifty per cent road dust by volume and her charcoal suit was thickly dusted with orange, making her look and feel like she'd rusted in place.

The final five or so minutes when she and her dad had ridden on a proper tarmac surface had been bliss, and Emma had spent most of it dusting herself off and making sure she hadn't transformed into a ginger on the way there. Such was the pernicious influence of the stuff that she was still mostly orange by the time they pulled into the car park of the cement works.

"Right," said her dad. "Doc's office is just up there, past the foreman's hut and on the left. As for me, I'm off to the mill, up that way." He pointed to the right. "Good luck, our kid. Knock 'em dead."

Emma smiled. "Thanks, Dad."

He turned and walked away. "Just, erm, don't actually knock the doctor dead, please. He's pretty useful and we've all got used to having him around—"

"Thanks, Dad!"

She turned away herself and followed the track round to Dr. Bell's office. It wasn't hard to find; the cement works didn't have a lot of places outside the main factory, just a few prefabricated buildings that reminded her of a kind of low, squared-off Nissen hut. They were just boxes made of corrugated iron, all identical, except for the one that wasn't. It looked the same from the outside, mostly, but the shadows didn't quite fall right. It seemed... wrong somehow. Well, not wrong, *per se*, but different. Something about it didn't sit right with her, as if what her eyes were telling her wasn't the whole story. It nagged at her brain something fierce.

Also, there was a sandwich board outside with "BONE MAN" painted haphazardly on it in large red letters. Emma walked around to the other side, and in rather neater paint read the words:-

Dr. Aidan Bell,

Supreme Mystic of the

Ninth Great and Noble Healing Arts Practitioners Society

Free Clinic Hrs: 9 a.m. - 8 p.m.

All donations appreciated, sandwiches especially welcome

Deeply confused but no longer the least bit surprised, Emma walked away and knocked on the door to the building. She heard footsteps coming from too far away and smoothed down her suit despite herself. She also took the opportunity to brush off a fresh layer of dust, this time a pale grey. At least it went better with the suit than orange did.

After a few minutes, the door finally opened and revealed a woman. Emma was stunned. She wore an elaborately-dyed dress of the richest blue Emma had ever seen, covered in swirls and stars and with beaded sleeves that rattled a little as she walked. Not that Emma could really see the sleeves; they were hidden underneath a bleached-white doctor's coat that sported a very wide lapel and buttons down the left-hand side, as well as a name tag that told the girl that she was looking at Doctor Helen Bell.

"Er," said Emma. "Er. Good morning?"

"Ohhh, you must be the new girl! Come on in, come inside, let's get the dust off you! Aidan told me a little bit about you!"

"Well. Er. Yes? Doctor Bell, er... the other Doctor Bell treated my father yesterday, and I'm a little confused as to why your lips are moving but there's no sound coming out? But I can still hear what you're saying? What?"

Helen's expression shifted from one of genial openness to a much more genuine note of approval. "He said you were a sharp one. And that you had a touch of the psychic about you." This time she was actually talking when she spoke, which for Emma was something of a relief. "Just you come with me, young lady, and we'll talk about what's to be done with you."

She walked back into the hut – which didn't look like a hut inside, from what Emma could see of it – and motioned to Emma to come inside. The girl took a steadying breath and stepped forward through the door.

"Well, that's a spot of good news, you're not a vampire," said Helen as the door closed. "I didn't technically invite you in, and it has to be explicit. Though that does depend on the vampire. Tell me, do you ever dream about flying around with nothing below your neck except your small intestine trailing along behind you like a kite string? Because those might not be dreams."

Emma just stared, silent except for the occasional quiet whimper.

"I'll take that as a no then. More good news! Today's turning out great already." Helen walked past her, low heels click-clacking on the floorboards, and sat down behind a desk. Emma followed along behind. "So, first thing's first, pull up a pew," she gestured to a wing-back armchair in front of the desk, which Emma gratefully sat down in, "and tell me what you want to know about all this. Be warned, you get one free question. Just one."

Emma thought for a brief moment. Then she said,

“What the *hell* is going on?”

Helen grinned. “Now that’s a question! Not too blue, not too specific, covers a multitude of problems and doesn’t really have a simple answer. I like you. I like how your mind works.”

Emma, who at the time wasn’t completely sure *if* her mind worked, just pasted on a smile and nodded as politely as she could.

“So then. If you want to be a part of this world of ours, there are things you have to know. Things that will be alien to your previous life and worldview. Things that might turn your whole life upside down, and not just your father. Are you prepared?”

Emma, by now completely off balance, defaulted to honesty. “Not even a little bit.”

“Good, you’re learning.” Helen favoured her with a real smile, then produced a great big book and dropped it on the table with a resounding crash, leaving it open. “This is the collected writings of the reiki masters, an ancient organization of Japanese mystic healers whose teachings date back thousands of years. It’s a first edition, not a reprint, not anything like that. And I’d like you to tell me what’s wrong with it.”

The girl got to her feet, trying to ignore the tension headache and the fact that she had coated the chair in a fine layer of orange and grey dust. She pinched the bridge of her nose, bent over the book, and began to really *think*. She was glaring at it after thirty seconds, all but demanding that the book give up its secrets. She was laser focussed, her mind trying fervently to parse the text in front of her, trying desperately to understand the wisdom of the ancients – and then suddenly something clicked.

“1922.”

Helen looked up. “I’m sorry?”

“The publication date. It’s 1922. Either this is only the first edition of this book, or reiki isn’t anywhere near as old as you said it is. Also, what *is* reiki? You said it was Japanese, right? So I’m going to hazard a guess that it’s not got anything to do with rakes.”

“You’re right, it does not in fact have anything at all to do with gardening equipment,” Helen said, with the air of someone who knows this is going to be a dinner party anecdote a while down the line. “And you’re correct. Reiki is an ancient tradition of Japanese mystical healing... that only came into existence in the Twenties.”

“But that doesn’t make sense!”

“Neither does levitation or telepathy, you’re doing fine with those.”

“I am *absolutely not* doing fine with those!”

“See? Honesty! You’ve got to know where your limits are before you can break through them, Emma, that’s the key to progress. Now then, let’s talk about reiki.” Helen picked up the book and leafed through it. “The guy who developed this stuff? He mostly hammered it all together out of shugendo, bits of Buddhism, and anything else he could find, tied it all together with what he called ‘numinous energy’, and started using it to heal people. A later master added in a bit of Christianity to make it more saleable in America, but we don’t know how well that’s gonna go yet, it’s only been about a decade. There’s just a small problem. It’s total hogwash.”

Emma looked up with a stunned cast to her face. “What? But—”

“But it works? Yes, it does. Laying on hands, chiropractic, reiki, acupuncture, massage therapy, it all *works*... sort of... just not in the way they describe it. That’s what we Bells are trying to figure out. The how of it all. Because we don’t believe in numinous energy. We don’t believe that the touch of a king heals scrofula. We don’t believe. We just check, and test, and try to teach checking and testing rather than straight belief. We don’t want it to be a miracle cure, because miracles don’t make a lick of bloody sense. We want it to be medicine.”

Helen hadn’t noticed that she’d got up from the chair until she looked down and saw her hands flat on the desk either side of the book. Even then, it took until she looked back up and saw Emma’s rabbit in the headlights expression that she sat back down again.

“Any questions?”

Emma sat stock still for a moment. The only sound in the room was the dust gently falling from the girl’s suit.

“Well then, let’s—”

“Why?”

“... Huh. One of the difficult ones.”

“I mean to say,” said Emma, colour slowly returning to her cheeks and dust falling from her hair, “that of course you want to understand something that you don’t right now. That’s just human. That’s what we’ve always done. But if it helps so many already... why question it? Why not just let it be? And what makes you know better than anyone else?”

Helen smiled again, warmer and more real. “The fact is, we don’t think we know better than anyone else. We don’t want to be conquistadores, blundering into an ancient society to try and rebuild it in our own image and steal anything not nailed down. We’re *scientists*, not colonists. If the only scientists in the world all look like Aidan, then science’s understanding of the universe isn’t complete and never will be. We’re not trying to claim we discovered anything, just that we’re researching it and giving the subject the respect it deserve.

“As for why we’re researching it in the first place, well, that’s because we want to help more people with it. If we figure out the underlying principles then we can help more people.

Otherwise, well, it's like... Aidan's so much better at explaining this... ah, heck with it. Imagine if electricity, all electricity, came from rubbing a balloon on your jumper. And instead of power stations like we know them today, we've got big rooms full of people in thick woolly jumpers wired up to an old set of mattress springs, and all they do of a day is rub balloons on their jumpers and that's how we're keeping all the lights on. Every school, every hospital, everything is powered by a room full of people rubbing balloons on their jumpers. What's wrong with this picture?"

"Well, how long have you got?" Emma asked. "Why don't you put a load of balloons in a circle and a load of jumpers on a wheel and rub them against it? Why don't you use a better method of generating static charge, like a Van de Graaff generator? Why do any of this when you could build stuff like, I don't know, like a steam turbine – oh."

"Yes. Oh." Helen was still smiling. "You *are* smart. You start today. Come on, I'll show you to the inner sanctum. And mind the third stair, it's just been cursed with ineffable cosmic malice," she called back as she walked out of the office door.

Emma trailed after her, wondering how the place had even been built. Then she looked at the third stair. It had indeed been cursed, a spiteful and malignant power flowing over it. She gazed upon it for a moment, almost able to sense the creator of the curse, feel the thing's sheer boiling hatred for those sad vestiges of humanity that refused to offer it eternal and undying servitude.

Then she picked out a couple of tissues from her suit pocket, laid them gently upon the cursed area to soak up the malevolent forces, and stepped over the threshold into a new world.

She also, at roughly the same time, stepped over the cat.

Chapter Four

November, 1949

Emma was ushered into a little room with a small leather-topped table in it and found herself face to face for the first time with a man she'd met yesterday.

Aidan Bell seemed taller in the flesh. Certainly wirier, though that might just have been the suit. He was a strange-looking man, pigeon-chested and awkwardly shaped in a way that meant not even the fashionable suit under his perfectly ironed white coat could disguise the fact that he was, and Emma lacked any other word for it, fundamentally *knobbly*. He seemed to be mostly knees and elbows. Even his chin was small and round and hard, like the head of a ball-peen hammer. He moved like a working model in a fairground sideshow, every motion jerky and stiff, as if he was some manner of automaton and some important bearing somewhere inside him was beginning to go bad. But he had good hair, and clever blue eyes, and he had a strange kind of grace about him. It was a dancer's grace; it reminded Emma of the time she'd seen Coppelgia performed by the Ballet Russe, and she couldn't help but wonder to herself how much of a performance this stiffness was too.

"Ah," he said, "welcome! I assume you're here about the apprenticeship. Congratulations, you've been accepted. We've comprehensively reviewed the other applicants and concluded that one singular quality of yours put you head and shoulders above the rest."

Emma opened her mouth, then closed it, then opened it again. "Let me guess: I exist."

"You exist, haha, just my little – oh. Well then. It's still perfectly true, as it happens, but I suppose even truth can lie when divorced from relevant contexts. The fact of it is, we weren't looking for an apprentice of any kind, and then we ran into you. Quite puzzling, in its own odd way. Tell me, is your father still floating at all?"

Emma swallowed hard. "Yes. Sir? Doctor? I'm not quite sure how to address you."

"Oh, Bell will do, Aidan or Helen if you want one of us in particular. We don't stand on ceremony here. Except, of course, when we do. How are you with entrails?"

"Entrails?"

"Ah. Perhaps further down the line, then, which at least appears to be the indication of your pallor. Don't worry, Trent, you won't have to fetch any of them out of the relevant sheep, we get them from the butcher on Cedar Road for what I must say is a very reasonable price, all in all. And yet, now that I have said this, the colour appears to be fading from your skin at, if anything, a considerably faster overall rate. I shall make a note of it." Aidan produced a small black notebook from the pocket of his waistcoat and clicked a propelling pencil into usefulness. "Not... *haruspex*... *material*..." Emma heard before the book and pencil disappeared again.

He looked up and caught Emma's brief expression of puzzlement. "A type of Roman soothsayer and practitioner of divination through offal, Trent, before you ask. I do try not to overspill but one's guard can be let down, and indeed let one down."

Emma nodded, trying to clamp down on her own thoughts. If Dr. Bell – Aidan – had enough familiarity with whatever the hell she was doing with her... mind reading? Maybe? ... that he dropped terminology for specific aspects of it into normal conversation, then maybe she could get some answers as to quite how she was doing it. Or even, God willing, what exactly she was doing in the first place. Perhaps he was even a mind-reader himself?

"Well then," Aidan continued. "This is our morning briefing! I have taken the liberty of preparing a small chart demonstrating what your duties as part of the Ninth Great and Noble Healing Arts Practitioners Society will be, at least for your first month or so. First and foremost, you will learn the secrets of healing, of what is wrong with a person and what may be fixed. You must understand, Trent, that will not be taught or tested in the manner of a schoolmaster; I will answer your questions but if you truly wish to learn you must ask those questions. There is only one telepathic person in this room, unless we are all being haunted by some spectre for whatever totally opaque motives the dead usually possess, and since I am not she, I must oblige you to ask your questions in the old-fashioned way. Do you take my meaning?"

Emma gave a brisk nod. "Yes, Doctor Bell."

"Capital. Your first task is a ritual dating back to the mid-eighteenth century. It will require the use of at least one specialist blade, and likely more. They will be provided for you. You will also need to commune with an ancient being of considerable power, and it is only after this that the ritual can commence. Are you prepared?"

"Yes, Doctor."

Aidan smiled bright amidst the gentle filter of dust. "Then be about your appointed task. The point of communion is just outside the door to your left, and the ritual space is through the door directly adjacent to it. You will know it when you see it."

Emma nodded again and walked briskly out of the door, not spotting the expressions of the doctors Bell.

Aidan was right, Emma thought to herself, she really would know it when she saw it.

A few yards down the hall from where the door to the treatment room opened stood an enormous glass case, within which was housed a shrine. The contents were... odd, to say the least. Seated cross-legged on the lacquered wooden floor, dressed in the kind of beautifully embroidered robes that would have had an emperor asking for fashion tips, was a body. Sort of. Body was really the wrong word; it looked like a cross between a bad waxwork and a shop window dummy. It was wearing an elaborate hat, reminiscent (to Emma, at least) of a bishop's mitre, and in one clawed hand rested a golden chain connected to a small iron bell.

The body's skin had a peculiar sheen to it, as if it had been varnished, and while the left eye was shut, the right was just an empty socket without a lid. Some kind soul had provided a range of thin gouges and marks around the edge of the socket, with the result looking like someone had fired a gun through a cobweb, but there it was.

Emma was spellbound. Somehow, in some strange way, she felt a closeness to the pull of death that she had never before experienced, but nevertheless felt in some way familiar, or at least was something with which she could empathise. That had to be it. Empathy for death and suffering, for the suffering was obvious once she figured out that the scarification around the lack of eye had come not from a knife but from fingernails. She felt compelled to act with the utmost reverence for this long-dead person – a monk perhaps? Clearly a man of the cloth – and knelt before the case, resting her bowed head upon the glass.

It came as something of a shock when the bell rang.

Emma sat bolt upright and stared in mounting horror as the figure in the case turned its head this way and that, as though stretching out muscles in its neck that looked like they ought to have rotted away long ago by now. *"I know you not, girl,"* she heard, the words reverberating in her soul. *"And from the caste of your features I can tell you have not visited me here before. Welcome to the shrine of Muji Kentaro. I am he."*

Emma was still staring, her heart pounding in her chest like a naval barrage. "Wh-wh-whuh? But. But you're. You're... you look like..." She flapped her hands, indicating the case and the talking skeleton-mummy-thing and everything in general.

"The years have been kind, have they not?" There was a sound like someone crumpling an old newspaper, and Emma realized the figure – Muji, she supposed – was smirking. *"I don't look a day over four hundred."*

Emma felt like she'd just put a full tank of diesel in a petrol-powered brain. She blinked once, twice, and tried to clear her head. "Er. Well," she said, "I was, er, I was told that there was a... ritual for me to perform? And that you'd give me the details?"

*"Ah, you're **that** new girl."* Muji leaned over, in a manner that suggested a bundle of tinder that had somehow got really drunk. *"I know **all** about you. They mentioned you last night when Aidan got back from his little astral projecting trip. Right then. Vegemite and tasty cheese, please. Should all be in the kitchen, that's that door over there."* He pointed at the door next to the case with a sound like someone unrolling a sheet of baking paper. *"The breadknife's in the second drawer down. So they tell me, anyway."*

"... They sent me to make you a sandwich."

"So it would appear."

"Okay. May I ask you something first?"

"Of course. I would be delighted to help you and the Bells."

"Alright then." Emma composed herself. "Mr. Muji... how can I even understand you? My brain's hearing English, but if you're over four hundred years old then you should be talking like someone out of a Shakespeare play, and that's assuming you know any English at all."

"Ah," he replied, "one of the difficult ones. It is complicated to explain in a short space of time, but the best I can do at present is say this: a brain is a brain is a brain. Even one that was desiccated centuries ago. We are not quite communicating through telepathic speech as much as we are brain signals that we are able to parse as language. What you are presently experiencing, as indeed am I, is akin to a potent and prolonged auditory hallucination."

"Aidan gave you that explanation, didn't he?"

"Yes. Yes he did."

"I see," Emma lied. "One last question. Quite an important one. How do I get your sandwich into the case? It looks pretty much airtight."

"That would be because it is airtight, to prevent corrosion and attack by outside elements. Neither I nor our mutual friends the Bells are blind to my fragility. However, they kindly provided a small box and double airlock system to keep me intact." An ancient finger the colour of a dried-on tea stain slowly unfurled as Muji pointed at a small door in the case's plinth. *"I appreciate your assistance in this matter, Emma. It is a kindness that will stand you in good stead."*

Emma's eyes suddenly narrowed. "Good stead with whom?"

"Oh, I was speaking only generally. Pay me no mind. And thank you for that sandwich!"

The last sentence was called as Emma went into the little kitchen. The dust wasn't as thick in the air here; a gentle breeze from somewhere made the room feel cool and bright rather than as stuffy as the rest of the building where the air was baked half to death by an uncaring summer sun. The whole room smelled more alive than anywhere else she'd been that day. The air was fresh and cool, and Emma felt totally reinvigorated, just by being in there. Though there was that little nagging doubt in the back of her mind: why sandwiches for a dead man? What purpose did that serve? Come to think of it, whose purpose?

And where the hell was the breadknife?

Chapter Five

November, 1949

It had been an hour since Emma's run-in with Muji, and all three of them were in the staff research area (according to the neatly-painted wooden sign discreetly placed on the door) next to the main treatment room. It was a peculiar space, made all the more so by the Bells' taste in soft furnishings and interior decoration. It resembled nothing so much as a large and well-stocked anthropological museum being struck by a hurricane that had just cleaved through a botanical garden.

There were plants everywhere and things everywhere else. Strange cultural artefacts filled cabinets, shelves, tables, and even hung from the ceiling like the prey of a very well-read spider. The array of large, comfortable armchairs were beautifully embroidered but looked rather heavier than it felt like they should, and they also had a folding table bracketed to each chair's right arm that was very obviously an after-market modification. It was strange, sure, but it was at least an understandable kind of strange. You knew why you were looking at something, even if it didn't make a great deal of sense for it to be there.

This was very much not the case for the small river running across the floor in a series of wide, flexible tubes.

Still, Emma presumed that they had their reasons, and it certainly brightened the place up. She idly wondered if she could dig a trench out to the little stream near her tent and let some running water flow there, underneath the canvas. The sound of running water was oddly comforting, like warm rain on a summer's evening.

"So," she said as she watched the two doctors work, "why a sandwich?"

Aidan looked up from behind an enormous potted rubber plant. "I beg your pardon?"

"Why get me to make a sandwich for Muji? Can he even eat?"

The doctor strained for a moment as he manoeuvred the plant pot onto a small pallet truck that he would assert bore not the slightest relation to the ones used in the cement works. It was even a different colour, or two different colours if you counted the pattern. That it left a small trail of wet paint on the floor was merely proof of how new it was. Obviously.

"Doctor?"

"If he were unable to eat, Trent, then the sandwich would be entirely surplus to requirements, would it not?" Aidan lowered the plant pot down with a small *splat* of drying paint and straightened up, cracking his knuckles and rolling his neck.

"That doesn't really answer my question."

"I am aware," he said, smiling. "Dearest, the angle of deflection in the walls, please?"

"Just a moment, Aidan, I'm trying to calibrate the theodolite," said Helen from the floor. "It really needs an oil and I reckon the ants have got in it again. I'll have some proper data on it in a minute."

"Then I shall take this opportunity to rest." Aidan sat down on a battered armchair and invited Emma to sit in the one opposite him. She walked over, sat down, and immediately regretted it. Something about the chair seemed almost sticky somehow. Sticky and unpleasantly warm, like someone else had just stood up from it after being sat there during the hottest part of the day. It felt *wrong*, in some fundamental way that she couldn't quite explain.

"Don't put yourself out on my account," Helen mock-groused from the floor. "Right. I'd better get on with marking up the new plant positions." She fumbled with a packet of chalk and began to make a string of peculiar little marks on the wooden floor.

Aidan cracked his knuckles again, the light from the high, clear window glinting off his one silver ring. It sent a fairy running around the walls, or that was what Emma knew her mum would call it. It was a point of light reflecting off the metal, nothing more. But still it glittered and shone and ran around the room, so it might not have been a fairy, but it might have been what fairies *were*.

"Many strange and impossible things have happened, Miss Trent, to you and to your family. I think it's high time I explained what's going on. And I'm very sorry, but I'm going to tell you everything."

"You asked, Trent, why your first task was to make a frankly disgusting sandwich for Mr. Muji. This is especially true since Mr. Muji is a man who, according to most medical literature and frankly in defiance of anything approaching common sense, ought to be dead. May I make an assumption about you, Miss Trent?"

Emma nodded, as she had done for most of the conversation.

"It is my genuine and heartfelt belief that you wish to help people. That being a good person is truly what you want from your life. I further think that it is something that affects those around you, inspiring them to do better by your example. Did you find this to be the case back in England?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that, it's not like I put a gun to anyone's head and told them to help people. Besides, I was a kid for most of it! Who pays attention to a teenage girl?"

"Who indeed? Aside from my wife and myself, of course." Aidan adjusted his tie and the fairy danced again. "But I would assert that they certainly paid attention to your example. Your presence in their lives where they could see you doing good in the world is something I would argue they could not ignore. Perhaps it had only the tiniest effect at first, but it spreads out. Let

us say that you help a woman carry her shopping up a hill. It's just the right thing to do. But that woman's day is improved, and by being in a better mood, she is more disposed to be kind or generous to those around her. Other people may see it and be moved to help others in their lives. If you drop a stone in a pond, Trent, there will be ripples, however small the stone. What people do matters, Trent, and I think you know that better than anyone. Therefore, I am going to ask you your own question. Why would your first task as a practitioner of healing arts be to make a sandwich for a man whom the Reaper has inexplicably passed by?"

Emma sat back in the chair, tried not to make a face at how it felt, and thought for a moment. "I was wrong to ask that question."

"Certainly not, Miss Trent. I do not believe there is such a thing as a wrong question, assuming it is asked in good faith and with the intention of listening to the answer. I would, however, potentially have come at it from a different angle."

Emma felt weird, uncertain, like she was standing on a rolling log and one wrong guess would throw her off it. "So. If you're teaching me how to be a healer, I need to ask a different question. If that's the case..." she swallowed, "and I'm very sorry if I sound rude here, but what exactly is *wrong* with Mr. Muji?"

Aidan smiled. "Now *that* is a much more satisfying question. I would wager any money you please that nobody in your family, however extended it may be, would have had cause to meet anybody with Mr. Muji's particular complaint. If you had to guess – and it would be very gracious of you if you indulged me in this matter – what would you say was wrong with Mr Muji? What, in your opinion, might have caused him to be as you see him now?"

There was a very long pause. Then Emma said,

"Everything?"

"Ha! At his age, you ought to be very right with that assessment, Ms. Trent! But alas it is not so. He has never experienced dengue fever, for example, or an infestation of botfly larvae. What he has experienced, however, is a call from above, and his desires were therefore achieved in a quite remarkable manner."

Emma just gaped. "I don't follow. Did you say he... he was cursed by God?"

"Such words would never pass my lips, Miss Trent. Certainly not within mental earshot of his cabinet, at any rate. Besides, Mr. Muji is a practitioner of the shugendo faith, and indeed confessed to me that he had only the most passing familiarity with the Christian god. But this is not about comparative theology, this is about shugendo in particular.

"Now, I am not a native Japanese speaker, but I can manage a conversation and read the language well enough. However, with Mr. Muji's invaluable aid, I have worked upon numerous translations and acquired considerable knowledge of Japanese healing arts. In return, he taught me about his faith and the manner of its practice. Shugendo, when translated, means something

along the lines of ‘the way to spiritual power through training and discipline’. It’s the sort of religion that encourages ascetic thoughts and practices. Indeed, it is a common practice – or at least it was in Mr. Muji’s day – for adherents to meditate under a waterfall to build up mental fortitude by medium of repeated bludgeoning by falling rivers.”

Emma shifted in her seat, as much as she could. “So, something akin to a subset of Christianity where everyone is... a flagellant or something, I suppose?”

“After a fashion, yes, though they went about it very differently. During Mr. Muji’s initial span of years, there became something of a fashion for extremes of asceticism among the yamabushi. That is the term for the practitioners of their faith, before you ask. It was an article of faith that through their abnegation of the self and through their sacrifice, they would bring redemption and salvation to their communities. I do not mean strictly in the spiritual sense, either. There was an epidemic of blindness in a village to the south of where Mr. Muji lived, and to save those living there he tore out his left eye and cast it into the river.”

Emma blanched and shrank back, shuddering a little. “Bloody hell! That’s... that’s barbaric!”

“Is it? Perhaps that line of thinking would hold more water if the yamabushi had been held down and his eye removed by some local dignitary who would not dream of sacrificing his own sight, no matter how many children he professed to his flock that it would save. But this was not what happened, Ms. Trent. This was a sacrifice of the yamabushi’s own volition, a prayer of blood and bone to save dozens of men, women and children from a night from which there can be no dawn. There are countless stories in Christendom of such martyrdom. Are they also barbaric? Or are they noble, however much they actually worked?”

“Well... well then. I suppose you’re right. But tearing out your own eyeball...” Emma shuddered, which didn’t feel very pleasant at all. The chair’s embroidered cover seemed to scratch her through her suit. “Did he do it, though? Did he save them?”

“As it happens, he himself did not. But this was only because he sacrificed his left eye. It needed both.”

“Then... Mr. Muji?”

“Gave his right eye, yes. You will no doubt have noted the scars upon his face from where he sacrificed it to the river gods. They were taken aback by such devotion, you see. Not to them, you understand. They were gods. They expect devotion. But Mr. Muji was from a village thirty miles away, on another river with different gods and different spirits and no real connection to the villagers that the other yamabushi had tried to save. Shugendo is a religion of place and prayer is a very local thing for local problems, but here was a man offering an eye to gods he did not worship for people he did not know. That was his devotion. To people, not to gods. To aiding them as best he could throughout his days. And so, they blessed him too.”

Emma had gone from fear to a thin, grey sadness. “Good. He deserved that. And so did those people that he saved.”

“Indeed they did. He did not become a doctor, though, for that was not his path as he saw it. He merely took it upon himself to aid however he could, and his best tool for that was through self-sacrifice... and, arguably, self-harm. At least when taken to the extremes that were considered noblest of all among the yamabushi.”

“This has something to do with how he... well, I’d say died, but is that really the right word given the circumstances?”

“You’re a sharp one, Trent. You really are.” Aidan looked sad when he said that, sad and spent and far older than he was, and for the life of her Emma could not figure out why.

“But yes, you are correct,” the doctor continued, his voice quieter now. Soft and sombre, like a pallbearer’s steps when carrying a coffin that’s far too small. “Mr. Muji’s village in the mountains was assailed by many problems over the years, and so he gave of himself to, if not turn back the tide, then at least save a few poor souls from being drowned by it. Until he was old, and looked far older, and he knew he had but one last thing left to give.

“A great plague had struck the whole prefecture, with the meanest commoner and the highest lord alike left rotting before they died. It was not a quick death, he told me, and the dead did not die well. From the symptoms he described, it seems to me that the village was riven by a form of pneumonic plague, perhaps with additional risks from diphtheria or some other such evil. Mr. Muji’s village was an island of safety, but his time was short. He knew what needed to be done. And so, he began the path to becoming a sokushinbutsu.

“The plague ravaged the land around his village but Muji stood firm. He retreated into the mountains, and he prayed. He ate only pine needles and burs and drank only a tea made from pine resin. The agony was exquisite, and not just because he was starving. The function of the pine resin tea was to preserve his body like a lacquer or a layer of varnish upon old furniture. He did this for ten thousand days, while around him plague and famine spread.

“This was during the Sengoku Jidai, when war was all the nation of Japan knew and the daimyos were cruel tyrants to the common folk. It was common, Mr. Muji tells me, for samurai to hide at a crossroads and ambush an unarmed peasant hauling their rice home. The samurai would cleave through this peasant’s body and leave them cut in half by the roadside. A man dead, a family heartbroken – or two, or three, or more. And the reason why this murder was committed? Because the samurai had commissioned a new sword, and desired to test the sharpness of its blade. This was the barbarism of Muji’s age, Miss Trent; the murder of innocents just because they were *there*. That is the truest expression of evil, to my mind and to my art. Death in droves to feed more death.

“And so Mr. Muji continued down his path. His diet was entirely without fats after the first thousand days, and so his weight and body all but vanished. After the first five thousand, he ate

nothing. His pine needle tea grew ever thicker until it was like drinking a thick soup, for he used less water every time until there was almost none left. His skin shrivelled. His body bent and cracked. His left eye turned a strange yellow colour. And yet still he lived. He could not take the final step and become sokushinbutsu, the body of a living Buddha left as an anchor by someone who had achieved enlightenment.

“But the wars and cruelties of the age never again touched Mr. Muji’s village. There were still sad days, yes; sometimes people simply have accidents that there is no preventing, or at least it was not possible to prevent during this part of Mr. Muji’s life. Still he sought to leave the mortal world, and with his new enlightenment protect the village. His final act was to request a glass case and a bell to be made for him. He would place himself in the centre of the village, within the case, and ring the bell once at dawn and once at sunset so that they knew he was still alive. Beyond that? He would meditate, and recite mantras, and consume nothing. It was a difficult task, and glass was an expensive commodity for a farming village, but money was saved. By the ten thousandth day of his sacrifice, it was ready.

“The villagers took it up to Mr. Muji’s cave in the mountain, dressed him in the silken robes of a high priest that had been sewn and embroidered for him by every woman in the village, and carried him back down to the market square in his beautiful glass tomb. Each day at sunrise, the bell rang. Each day at sunset, the bell rang. And this carried on for... well, for too long.

“Eventually, the Tokugawa established themselves as the victors of this period, and the emperor of Japan heard tell of this ancient monk who survived every horror of the world. And so, his glass case was taken from the village – stolen, in fact – and presented to the emperor by a local lord wishing to curry favour in the endless games of intrigue at court. Having a living relic delighted the Emperor, and he would sit and meditate with the monk in the glass box, who did nothing but ring his little iron bell twice a day. He was nothing more than a toy to this Emperor, an amusing little gewgaw with no value save as a true novelty.

“It was hundreds of years later when he made his escape, though it was not by choice. Telepaths tend to come in two distinct varieties; those who can receive, and those who can send. Mr. Muji was one of the former but, by dint of a few centuries of psychic training, harnessed the latter power as well. He planted thoughts in the heads of a few courtiers, as well as a Dutch merchant who assumed that he was hearing the voice of his God. The messages took root and blossomed into action, and the men convinced the new Emperor that it was an elaborate fake, a cunning artifice. And so Mr. Muji left, carried upon the back of a tall ship all over the world. He travelled widely and found new knowledge wherever he went, and all because of his sacrifice.

“You see, the gods of the river had enchanted him to become an eternal protector, capable of weathering any sacrifice to be a pillar of strength for all who needed it. He was a noble spirit and a wellspring of their power, now and forever. He did not know this until he had self-mummified, and after that he sought new places to help. His aid was always supernatural and always subtle, working from the background as an *éminence grise*, finding those who needed his help and calling out to others who might save them. That’s why he’s part of our team here in Geelong, Miss Trent. He is our signal and our listening post, allowing us to help those who need it the

most. And that is why we bade you make him a Vegemite sandwich: to teach you that helping someone does not begin with healing or power. It begins with kindness.

“For you see, there are other spirits out there, Lily Trent.”

Emma’s eyes widened. “What are you talking about? What the hell do you mean? And who on God’s green earth is Lily?”

“I am speaking,” Aidan said, and now he stood up, and Emma couldn’t, “of the unquiet dead whose essences still linger in the mortal world. Imagine a nurse, training in a London hospital when the German bombing is at its very worst. This is not an idle thought exercise, Emma, nor is it a request. By my art and by my strength, I compel it of you now.”

Emma scrambled at the arms of the chair, raked her nails across the surface, but it was like trying to claw at the sea. It parted and came back, parted and came back, parted and—

There were so many babies in the hospital. Too many. From mothers who were just too young. There always had been, of course, but the bombing made people scared and desperate for some kind of release. She saw them in the maternity ward, and she saw the little babies in their iron-lung incubators, each one of them too small from poverty and rationing and wretchedness, and a hate filled up for a society that could do this to CHILDREN, before they even got a CHANCE at life, and the hate filled her, seared her, turned her blood to ash and her mind to flame, and it wasn't RIGHT, and she walked past the window and saw her reflection in the firelight of the raid—

“That’s not my face! Who’s that? What are you doing to me?” Emma screamed and thrashed and flailed in the chair, but it would not move and neither could she. “What the hell is going on?”

“You are remembering, Emma. *You* are remembering.”

The bombs kept raining down on the city, ack-acks and searchlights doing nothing to stop the endless waves of death, and it wasn't fair either. She might – MIGHT – have understood if they were raiding military bases, like they had been before, but what was there in London? The War Office? The King? Mr. Churchill and his fat cigars? Was that who they were trying to kill, and damn the consequences to the children who would never live to see the SUN? That couldn't be fair! In what world was something so evil ever right? She stared into the window and then she looked up as something screamed like a newborn babe but louder, and louder, and closer—

“You were good and kind, Emma, I think. You were always kind. And you wanted to make others kind too. You were a person with a keener sense of what is decent than many I have met, and your intentions were never anything but good. An old saying comes to mind about the road to Hell.”

“You don’t know what you’re TALKING ABOUT!” Emma’s eyes were bulging, her face flecked with spittle as she fought against the chair. “I’m a nurse, damn you! I make things better! That’s the whole point of being one! Why have power if you don’t use it? Why teach yourself the power

to heal if all you're going to do with it is sit there like a lemon in a tin shed full of junk? I bet you hid, Aidan Bell, Bone Man of Geelong. If it wasn't in your house then it was in a book, pretending to help people until the war was done and claiming virtue afterwards. I bet you did, and I bet you still are, and I name you COWARD!"

Aidan flinched and leapt backwards like someone had tried to run him through with a sword. From behind the chair something crashed and fell over, but Emma couldn't see it, and she was still stuck in the BLOODY CHAIR, she was going to kill something if she couldn't get out of it, and she was going to SLAUGHTER something if she could.

But the Bone Man was still standing, though his hand shook, the long fingers clenched into a white-knuckled snowball of a fist. He took a breath, gently touched his free hand to his brow, and stepped forward again, closer to the spitting, thrashing thing in the chair.

"The power of a ghost is to affect the mortal world, Emma. The weak ones do it through objects, through thrown plates and slammed doors like a violent drunkard looking for a fight and not caring that it's with his own wife. The stronger ones do it with animals and things with small minds, and the ones with power? They do it with people. And you are strong, Emma. You have *real* power. You don't just work through people, you can change them. You can mould them into something you wish you'd had the chance to be. That is your power, and it is born from rage at a task unfinished. Your fury is your strength, Emma. It is also your weakness."

Emma was beyond words at this point, hissing and spitting like a cornered cat, throwing herself into the sides of the great, soft chair.

"Muji picked up on you the moment you first drove past Geelong. Two young women in one young body, double the normal arrangement and infinitely worse for all concerned. When Gregory Trent began to work here, I watched and I waited as he spoke of his daughter, who was so wilful but of whom he was so fiercely proud. Of how she had changed upon coming back to London; how she had been a shy sort of girl before, but how now she was so purposeful in her helpfulness; how she now wouldn't be turned away by anyone she decided to aid, regardless of whether or not her aid was required or even wanted; of how it was better to let her get her way. My fears confirmed, we three acted.

"Your father does not have an allergic reaction to gravity. His levitation will fade quite naturally a few days. It was not a side effect of his treatment for working himself halfway to the grave so that he could provide for his family; it was bait. It remains something of which I am deeply ashamed. It was also unbelievably effective. It intrigued you. It drew you in. And frankly, it flattered your sense of self-importance, that you would be introduced a new world that respected your intelligence and gave you power and glory. I am a chiropractor. I manipulate bones. Manipulating people is much harder, I will grant you, but it is far from impossible once you know what goes where.

"We laid a trap for you, Emma, and you walked right into it. You could have left at any time before you met Muji, but when he met you and confirmed his diagnosis, we set the trap and sat

you down, and you didn't get up even though we hadn't finished chalking out the runes of binding on the floor. You didn't get up because you were too busy being taken seriously for what you thought was the first time in your life. These armchairs are decorated with the Seal of Solomon as shown in the Lesser Key, but with how carefree you were I think a kitchen stool would have sufficed.

"You were drawn to the strangeness of the healing arts like a moth to a candle, Emma, because you wanted a new kind of strength, a new kind of power to help you fix the world. But you can't force people to be better. You can only show them, and help them whenever they need it. That is healing. That is kindness. It is very rare for ghosts to comprehend that, especially when they are strong enough to affect people. What was it you said? Why have power if you don't use it? Because when your power is pressing people into a mould of yourself and turning them into facsimiles of you, that power is *wrong*, no matter what you use it for. I spent seven years learning chiropractic healing, how to heal and harm and shatter with a touch. I am still learning how not to.

"Perhaps I am a coward, Emma. Your power seeps into my bones and makes me want to scream and run away like a lost child in a dark wood. But I am myself, and I am sure of myself, in a way that, say, a teenage girl coming back from evacuation to the countryside after a war tore down her whole world was not and could not be. Her name is Lily Trent, Emma. Is, not was. Your name was Emma, when you were alive, and it is time to return it to the dead."

"You can't do this! I helped! I was good! I did the right thing!"

Aidan stepped forward, and took another step, and he was running to the chair and slammed his arms into it, either side of Lily's *Emma's* still-thrashing head. "YOU STOLE A CHILD!"

Emma Lily stopped dead, her face ashen grey and bloodless.

Aidan stood back up. He took a moment to compose himself. "You stole a child, Emma, and you stamped upon her soul until her body could fit you. It will be a miracle if she is undamaged. Maybe you don't know how dangerous that is. Maybe you are unaware of the kind of monster unleashed when a soul is broken in some way. Maybe you are aware of it, and you just don't care. Your reasons and excuses are irrelevant to me. They are discordant birdsong blown in on an ill wind. I cannot abide your presence any longer."

"I... I didn't... she was right *there*, I could *help*..."

"As last words go, I've heard worse." Aidan's voice was soft now, but there was a ringing to it that didn't come from him. "Coward you named me, but Emma Finch I name you. Born 1919, died 1940. A nurse, and a kind soul, and a good person misled by rage and darkness. It's time you left this world, Ms. Finch. A new one awaits you."

He held out his hands, and closed his eyes, and the sound of bombs and screams filled his mind until there was the swish of a long blade,

And slowly

Painfully

Like a baby bird emerging from an egg

Lily Trent woke up.

“Good evening, Miss Trent,” said the man in front of her. He was tall and gangly and knobbly, with sticky-out elbows and long thin fingers and knees that could win prizes at a holiday camp, and he wore a silver ring that made a splinter of light dance on the walls in the fading sun, and his eyes were bright and had left tear tracks down the edges of his face, and he *shone*, every last part of him.

“I’m, I’m very sorry,” Lily said, and her throat felt red-raw for some reason, “but have we met? I feel like I know you, but I cannot place your name, sir.” Her voice was mouse-quiet and earnest and her own, and wasn’t that a funny way of putting it?

“I am a friend of your father’s, my dear,” he replied.

“He calls me the Bone Man.”