THE DROWNED CITIES

By

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Part 1 — War Maggots
Chains clanked in the darkness of the holding cells.

The reek of urine from the latrines and the miasma of sweat and fear twined with the sweet stench of rotting straw. Water dripped, trickling down ancient marblework, blackening what was once fine with mosses and algae.

Humidity and heat. The whiff of the sea, far off, a cruel tormenting scent that told the prisoners they would never taste freedom again. Sometimes a prisoner would call out, praying, a Deep Water Christian or a Rust Saint devotee, but mostly the prisoners waited in silence, saving their energy.

A rattling from the outer gates told them someone was coming. The tramp of many feet.

A few prisoners looked up, surprised. There was no stamping of the crowd, no soldiers shouting for bloodsport coming from above. And yet the prison gate was being opened. A puzzle. They waited, hoping the puzzle wouldn’t touch them. Hoping that they might survive another day.

The guards came as a group, using one another for their courage, urging each other forward, jostling their way down the cramped passageway to the last rusty cell. A few had pistols. One carried a stun stick, sparking and cracking, the tool of a trainer, even though he had none of its mastery.
All of them carried the reek of terror.

The keymaster peered through the bars. Just another dim sweltering lockup, straw strewn and molding, but in the far corner, something else. A huge shadow, puddled.

“Get up, dogface,” the keymaster said. “You’re wanted.”

No response came from the mountain of shadow.

“Get up!”

But still there was no response. In the neighboring cell, someone coughed wetly, a sound heavy with tuberculosis. One of the guards muttered, “It’s dead. Finally. Has to be.”

“No. These things never die.” The keymaster pulled his baton out and rattled it against the iron bars. “Get up now, or it will be worse for you. We’ll use the electricity. See how you like that.”

The mounded shadow showed no sign of hearing. No sign of life. They waited. Minutes passed. More minutes.

Finally, another of the guards said, “It’s not breathing. Not a bit.”

“It’s done for,” agreed another. “The panthers did the job.”

“ Took long enough.”

“I lost a hundred red chinese on that. When the Colonel said it would go up against six swamp panthers…” the guard shook his head ruefully. “Should have been easy money.”

“You never seen these monsters fight up north, on the border.”

“If I had, I would’ve bet on the dogface.”
They all stared at the dead mass. “Well, it’s maggot meat now,” the first guard said. “The Colonel won’t be happy to hear it. Give me the keys.”

“No,” the keymaster rasped. “Don’t believe it. Dogfaces are demon spawn. The beginning of the cleansing. Saint Olmos saw them coming. They won’t die until the final flood.”

“Just give me the keys, old man.”

“Don’t go near it.”

The guard looked at him with disgust. “It’s no demon. Just meat and bone, same as us, even if it is an augment. You tear it up, you shoot it enough, it dies. It’s no more immortal than the warboys who fight for the Army of God. Get the Harvesters down here. See if they want its organs. We can sell the blood, at least. Augments have clean blood.”

He jammed the key into the lock. Reinforced steel squealed aside, an entire grate specially designed to hold the monster. And then, a second set of locks for the original rusting bars that had been good enough for a man, but not enough to hold this terrifying mix of science and war.

The door scraped back.

The guard started for the corpse. Despite himself, he felt his skin prickling with fear. Even dead, the creature harbored momentous terror. The guard had seen those massive fists crush a man’s skull into blood and bone fragments. He’s seen the monster leap twenty feet to sink fangs into a panther’s jugular.

In death, it had curled in on itself, but still it was huge. In life, it had
been a giant, towering over all, but its size hadn’t been what made it deadly. The blood of a dozen predators pumped in its veins, a DNA cocktail of killing—tiger and dog and hyena, and Fates knew what else. A perfect creature, designed from the blood up to hunt and war and kill.

Though it had walked like a man, when it bared its teeth, tiger fangs showed, and when it pricked up its ears, a jackal’s ears listened, and when it sniffed the air, a bloodhound’s nose scented. The soldier had seen it fight in the ring enough times to know that he would rather face a dozen men with machetes rather than this hurricane of slaughter.

The guard stood over it for a long time, looking at it. Not a breath. No hint of movement or life. Where the dogface had once been strong and vital and deadly, it was now nothing but meat for the Harvesters.

Dead at last.

He knelt and ran his hand through the monster’s short fur. “Pity. You were a money-maker. Would have liked to see you fight the coywolv we was lining up. Would have made good ring.”

A golden eye flared in the darkness, full of malevolence.

“A pity, indeed,” the monster growled.

“Get out!” the keymaster shouted, but it was too late.

A shadow exploded into motion. The guard slammed into the wall and crumpled to the floor like a sack of mud.

“Close the gate!”

The monster roared and the bars clanged shut. The keymaster
frantically tried to relock the cell, then leaped back as the monster hurled itself against the cage, snarling, tiger teeth bared.

Iron bars bent. The guards yanked electrical prods from their belts. Blue sparks showered as they beat at the creature and the bars, trying to keep it away while the keymaster tried to close the reinforced second gate. They fumbled for pistols, hardened killers reduced to gibbering terror by the monster’s snarl. The creature slammed against the bars again. Rusted iron cracked and bent.

“It won’t hold! Run!”

But the keymaster held steady, reworking the locks of the more powerful cage. “I almost got it!”

The monster ripped a rusty bar free of its mooring and lashed through the gap. Iron smashed into the keymaster’s skull. The man collapsed. The other guards fled, plunging down the corridor, screaming for help.

The monster tore more bars free, working methodically. The rest of the prisoners were all screaming now, shouting for help and mercy. Their cries echoed in the prison like trapped birds.

The first layer of bars gave way, allowing the monster access to the second cage. It tested the gate. Locked. Growling, the creature crouched and slid one huge fist through the bars, reaching, stretching for the keymaster’s foot. It dragged the man close.

In another moment, the monster had the key in its hand and the key in the lock. With a click it opened. The gate screeched aside.
Carrying the iron bar of his prison, the creature called Tool limped
down the cellblock to the stairs, and climbed into the light.
Chapter 2

Tool covered miles. He was built to do so, and even wounded, he moved with a speed that would have exhausted a human being within minutes. He forded algae-thick canals and limped through bean fields and soaked rice paddies. He passed farmers with wide broad hats who stared up from their sweating work and fled in fear. He circled and doubled back through bomb-shattered buildings, confusing trail and scent. Always, he moved further from the Drowned Cities, and always the soldiers pursued.

At first, he had hoped his pursuers would give up. Colonel Glenn Stern and his patriotic army had more than enough enemies to keep them occupied; the Drowned Cities were full of fighting factions, perpetually tearing at one another’s throats. A single escaped augment might not be worth the Colonel’s attention. But then the panthers had caught up with Tool, and he’d known that the Colonel would not let his prized fighting monster slip free so easily.

Pain lanced through Tool’s body as he limped onward, but he ignored it. So what if he’d torn his shoulder from its socket in his mad attack on the bars? So what if the hunting panthers had laid long deep gashes down his back? So what if his one eye was blind? He was moving and free and he was trained to ignore pain.

Pain held no terror for him. Pain was, if not friend, then family, something he had grown up with in his creche, learning to respect but never yield to. Pain was simply a message, telling him which limbs he could still use to
slaughter his enemies, how far he could still run, and what his chances were in the next battle.

   Behind him, the hounds began to bay, picking up his scent.

   Tool growled in irritation, unconsciously baring teeth as cousin creatures called for his blood.

   The hounds were perfect killers, just as he. They would throw themselves mindlessly into the fight again and again until they were torn to pieces, and they would die content, knowing that they had done their duty for their masters. Tool’s dog-nature—spliced into his genes by scientific design—knew their mastiff urges. They would never stop until they were dead, or he was.

   Tool didn’t blame them. He too had been loyal and obedient, once.

   Tool reached a new thicket of jungle and plunged into its shadows, tearing through tangling vines. He moved like an elephant through the vegetation, crashing and crackling. He knew he was leaving a trail that even a stupid human being could follow, but it was all he could do to keep moving.

   Well-fed, with all his limbs working, he could have run these sad dogs and soldiers for days, doubling back and destroying them one by one in the jungle, whittling dogs and humans down to a huddled fearful tribe around a solitary campfire. Now, he doubted he could kill more than a few. Worse, after the last last ambush he had set, they had become clever to to his ways. They understood—now—how easily their bones snapped.

   Tool stopped, panting, his tongue lolling from his mouth, chest heaving. He sniffed the humid air.
Salt breezes.

The sea.

Somewhere north there was an inlet. If he could make the sea, he might escape them still, might dive into the ocean and become one with the marine world. He could swim. It would hurt, but he could do it.

He turned north and east, pushing on by force of will. Behind him, the dogs followed.

Tool almost wanted to laugh. They were such good dogs, and because of it, many of them would die. Tool, on the other hand, was a very bad dog. His masters had told him so many times, as they beat him and trained him and forged his will to match their own. They had forged him into a killer, and then fit him into the killing machine that had been his pack. A platoon of slaughter. For a little while, he had been a good dog, and obedient.


Bad dog.

Tool had been such a bad dog that he still lived. He should have been dead on those muddy tidal flats outside of Kolkata, where the waters of the river Ganges met the warmth of the Indian Ocean, and where blood and bodies floated in salt waves as red as General Caroa’s flag. He should have been dead in wars on foreign shores. He should have been dead a thousand times over. And yet always he had survived to fight again.
Tool paused, chest heaving, and scanned the forest tangles. Iridescent butterflies flitted through beams of reddening evening sunlight. The forest canopy was turning dark, emerald leaves turning muddy as night came on. The black tropics, some people called this place, for its winter darkness. A sweltering humid environment where pythons and panthers and coywolv stalked at will. Killers all. It galled Tool that he was now prey, and weakening.

The guards had been starving him for weeks, and his untreated wounds oozed pus. Only his massive immune system kept him on his feet at all. Any other creature would have succumbed weeks ago to the super-bacteria that coursed through his veins and seethed in his wounds, but his time was running out.

When he had been a good dog, an owned dog, a loyal dog, his masters would have stitched and treated wounds like these. General Caroa would have worked hard to protect his battle investment, showering Tool with trauma care so that he could once again become the apotheosis of slaughter. Good dogs had masters, and masters kept good dogs close.

Behind him, the hounds bayed again. Closer.

Tool stumbled forward, counting the steps until he would fall, knowing that flight was hopeless. A final stand, then. One last battle. At least he could say that he had fought. When he met his brothers and sisters on the far side of death, he would tell them that he had not yielded. He might have betrayed everything that they had been bred for, but he had never yielded….

Salt swamps opened abruptly before him. Tool sloshed into water.
Huge snakes slithered away in ripples, pythons and cottonmouths recognizing that they wanted no traffic with a creature like him. He waded further and suddenly found unexpected beckoning depths. The swamps here were deep, many meters deep. A welcome surprise. This landscape hid sinkholes of water.

With a sigh, Tool sank into the swamp, feeling bubbles forming around him.

Down.

The slits of his nostrils tightened, sealing in his breath. A translucent membrane slid across his remaining eye’s iris, protecting his vision as he sank into the depths of the swamp, down amongst crawdads and mangrove roots.

_Let them hunt me now._

Above, soldiers came crashing close. The voices of men, and others, younger. Some of them small enough that Tool could easily eat one in a day. But all of them armed and all of them adrenalized by the hunt. They shouted and called, their voices twining with the barking and stampeding of their dogs, all of it filtering down through the waters to Tool’s listening ears.

Splashes in the shallows. Dogs swimming about, their legs windmilling above him, baying in confusion, trying to find Tool’s direction. He could see them up there, canine shanks cycling madly. He could swim up and yank them down, one by one…

Tool resisted the urge to hunt.

“Where the hell did it go?”

“Shhhhh! Hear anything?”
“Shut your dogs, Clay!”

Silence fell. At least as much silence as pathetic human beings and dogs could summon. Even through the waters, Tool could hear their attempts at stealthy breathing, but they were trying, in their childlike way, to hunt.

“No spoor,” one of them muttered as footsteps stalked through the grasses. “Tell the LT, we got no spoor.”

Tool could imagine them all on the edge of the swamps, staring out at black waters. Listening to the pulse and scratch of insects and the far cry of a wild panther.

They were hunters. But now, as night closed in on them, and the swamp became black and hot and close, they were becoming prey.

Tool again shook off the urge to hunt. He must still think like prey and take advantage of their failures. He could lie below the surface for as long as twenty minutes, slowing his heart rate, slowing his bulk so that he needed almost nothing at all.

Without exertion, he might even be able to lie there longer, but twenty minutes, he knew for certain--much as he knew that he could run for five miles without rest amongst the high passes of Tibet, or for three days without pause across the blistering sands of North Africa’s Sahara.

He counted slowly.

The hounds paddled and circled as the soldiers tried to figure out what to do.

“You think it doubled back again?”
“Could be. It’s crafty. Ocho can take a squad—“

“Ocho’s all ripped up.”

“Van and Soa, then! Go back along the trail. Spread out.”

“In the dark?”

“You questioning me, Gutty?”

“Where the hell’s the LT?”

The ripple and bubble of the swamp flowed into Tool’s finely tuned ears. He let them spread wide like fans, cupping the waters. Listening.

The flash of tiny pike. The skitter of crawdads. The distant womblike slosh and surge of salt water as it blended with cousin waters on the shore, where swampland and surf smashed together and sought ever higher tidelines.

“It’ll head for the ocean,” one of the soldiers said. “We should put another squad up on the north side.”

“No, it will hide here, in the swamps. It’ll stay right here. Safe enough.”

“Maybe the coywolv will get it.”

“Not likely. You saw how it did those panthers when it fought in the ring.”

“There’s a lot more coywolv out here.”

Deep in the waters, something dark and hungry stirred.

Tool startled, then froze.

A monster was easing through the waters, vast and silent, a shadow of death. Tool stifled a growl as it passed, fighting to keep the rhythms of his heart slow, fighting to save precious oxygen. Meters and meters of leathery hide slid
past him, a great king of a reptile. The creature was bigger than the largest komodo dragons of the equator. A massive horror of an alligator, tail and legs moving easy, propelling it through darkening waters with a predatory grace. It circled, attracted by the frenetic hounds and their foolish splashing. The first dog sank before it could yelp. The next went under in a snap. Blood filled the water.

The men yelled and gunshots flashed. Automatic weapons. Shotguns. Sparks of fear as the men peppered the water with their bullets.

"Get it! Get it!"

Heavy impact. A sharp pain blossomed in Tool's shoulder. He flinched at the bad luck, but held still. He'd been shot before; this was not the worst. The bullet had smashed into the meat of his body. He could survive the wound.

"It's not the dogface! It's a damn gator!" The soldiers unloaded more angry shots into the water. Whistled back their hounds. "Heel!"

Blood smoked from Tool's shoulder. He pressed his fist to the wound, trying to staunch the flow. There was enough blood in the water that Tool's own blood might not be the bait that it would have been, but he smelled of wounded sickness.

The soldiers remained at the edge of the pool, shooting at whatever moved and cursing the alligator. The monster circled in the water, finishing the remains of the hounds, unperturbed by the powerless men above.

Tool watched the alligator, measuring this new variable in the equation of his survival. He felt no brotherhood with this beast. Reptiles, if they were any
part of his blood design, were deeply buried in the helixes of his DNA. This creature was nothing other than an enemy.

Above, the men’s voices finally faded, seeking their prey in other places.

Trapped in the deepening darkness, Tool continued to study the alligator. If he moved, the monster would sense him, and now his lungs were beginning to heave, demanding air.

Tool clenched his jaws and waited, hoping that the alligator might still move off.

Instead, the lizard sank to the bottom of the pool, sated.

If Tool was fast, he might make it out of the pool in time, but he would have to be quick. He knew that he had only two hundred heartbeats of air before he became too weak to fight. The blood thumped in Tool's ears, counting down his death. He could slow the beat of his heart, but he could not stop it.

Tool reached up and took hold of a thick mangrove root, preparing to propel himself upward.

The alligator whipped about. Tool had been about to kick for the surface, but now, if he let himself float free, he would be easy bait. The alligator flashed toward him, mouth gaped wide. Tool levered himself aside, using the roots to maneuver. Teeth snapped, missing.

The alligator came around. Its tail slammed Tool into the mangrove roots. Tool’s vision went bloody. The alligator arrowed in again, jagged mouth gaping. Tool grabbed for a weapon. He tore at the mangrove roots but the wood
ripped free with only a stub.

The alligator's maw gaped wide. Vast oblivion.

Tool lunged for the monster, the chunk of splintered root clenched in his fist. With a silent roar, Tool rammed his fist into the monster's mouth. The alligator's jaws snapped shut. Its teeth crushed Tool's shoulder, piercing flesh. Pain like lightning.

The monster rolled and dove, dragging Tool with it. Instinctively, the alligator knew it only needed to suck the air from its enemy. It was born for this fight, and in its decades of life, none had ever bested it. It would drown Tool, as it had drowned so many other unwary beasts, and then it would feed well.

Tool struggled, trying to pry open the monster's mouth, but even the half-man's strength was no match for the alligator's bite. The teeth were clamped like a vise. The alligator rolled, slamming Tool into the mud, pressing him down.

Panic swept through Tool. He was drowning. He barely fought off the instinct to breathe water. Again he pried at the lizard's jaws, knowing it was pointless, but unable to surrender.

*The reptile is not your enemy. It is nothing but a beast. You are its better.*

A foolish stray thought, and small comfort--killed by something with a brain the size of a walnut. Tool's teeth showed in a rictus of contempt as the alligator plowed him through more weeds and mud.

*This dumb beast is not your enemy*

Tool was not some brute animal, only able to think in terms of attack or
flight. He was better than that. He hadn't survived this long by thinking like an animal. Panic and mindlessness were his only enemy, as always. Not bullets or teeth or machetes or claws. Not bombs or whips or razor wire.

And not this dumb beast. Panic, only.

He could never break free of the alligator's jaws. They were perfect clamps, evolved to lock down and never release. No one pried free of an alligator's bite. Not even something as strong as Tool. So he would no longer try.

Instead, Tool lashed his free arm around the beast's head, locking it in a bear hug, and squeezed. His grip forced the alligator's jaws tighter around his own arm and shoulder. Its teeth pierced deep. More of Tool's blood clouded the water.

In the dim recesses of its tiny brain, perhaps the alligator was pleased to have its teeth sink deeper into enemy flesh. But Tool's other arm, engulfed in the monster's maw, was free to work. Not from the outside, but from within.

Tool turned the shattered chunk of mangrove root and began methodically ramming it into the roof of the monster's mouth. Ripping through flesh, driving the wood deeper and deeper.

The alligator, sensing something was wrong, feeling the tearing within itself, tried to open its jaws, but Tool, instead of letting go, now clamped the monster tighter.

*Do not run away,* he thought. *I have you where I want you.*

Blood misted from Tool's shoulder, but battle fury strengthened him. He had the advantage. He might be running out of air and life, but this ancient
reptile was his. The alligator’s bite was deadly, but it had its own weakness: it lacked the muscle strength to open its mouth easily.

The mangrove root ground to dust but Tool continued, using his claws, ripping deeper and deeper.

The alligator thrashed wildly, trying to shake free. Decades of easy killing had never prepared it for a creature like Tool, something more primal and terrifying than even itself. It writhed and rolled, shaking Tool the way a dog shakes a rat. Stars swam in Tool’s vision but he held on, and tore deeper. His air ran out. His fist found bone.

With one final heave, Tool’s claws ripped through the lizard’s skull and tore into its brain.

The monster began to shudder and die.

Did it understand that it had always been outmatched? That it was dying because it had never evolved to face a creature such as Tool?

Tool’s fist crushed the lizard’s brain to pulp.

The great reptile’s life drained away, victim to a monster that should never have existed, an unholy perfection of killing, built in laboratories and honed across a thousand battlefields.

Tool’s claws carved out the last of the brain meat of the ancient lizard, and the alligator fell limp.

A rush of primal satisfaction flooded Tool as his opponent surrendered to death. Blackness swamped Tool’s vision, and he let go.

He had conquered.
Even as he died, he conquered.
“That’s enough, Mahlia.” Doctor Mahfouz straightened with a sigh.

“We’ve done all we can. Let her rest.”

Mahlia straightened and wiped her lips of Tani’s dying spit, giving up on breathing for the girl who had already stopped breathing for herself. Before her, the young woman lay still, empty blue eyes staring up at the bamboo spars of the squat’s ceiling.

Blood covered everything: the doctor and Mahlia, Tani, the floor, old Mr. Salvatore. Ten pints, the doctor had taught Mahlia in her studies; that was what filled a human being. And from the look of it, all of it was out of their patient. Bright and red. Rich with oxygen. Not blue like the placental sac, but red. Red as rubies.

What a mess.

The squat stank. Burned vegetable oil from the lamp, the iron spike of blood, the rank sweaty smell of desperate people. The smell of pain.

Sunlight speared through cracks in the bamboo walls of the squat, molten blades of day. Doctor Mahfouz had asked if Tani and Mr. Salvatore preferred to do the birth outside, where it would be cooler, and they’d have better air and light, but Mr. Salvatore was traditional and wanted privacy for his daughter, even if she’d been anything but private in her love life. Now it felt as though they were swaddled in the smell of death.

In the corner of the squat, tucked under a pile of stained blankets,
Tani’s killer lay quiet. The infant had nursed for a second, and Mahlia had been surprised at how happy she’d been for Tani that her little wrinkled baby was healthy and that the birth hadn’t been so long as she had expected.

And then Tani’s eyes had rolled back and the doctor said, *Mahlia, come here, please* in the way that told you something was really bad but he didn’t want to scare the patient.

Mahlia had come down to the doctor where he knelt between Tani’s legs and seen the blood, more and more of it, his hands covered with it, and the Doctor had wanted pressure on her belly, and then he’d wanted to cut.

But they didn’t have any drugs to knock Tani out, to make the cutting easy, nothing with them but his last black market needle’s worth of heroin, and then he’d had his scalpel out and Tani was gasping and asking what was wrong and the doctor had said, “I need you to hold still, dear.”

Of course, Tani panicked. Doctor Mahfouz called for her father and Mr. Salvatore climbed up the ladder into the squat, and when he saw the blood he shouted, demanding to know what was wrong and of course he panicked Tani even more.

The doctor ordered him to her head, to hold her shoulders while he sat on her legs, and then he asked Mahlia to help him even though all Mahlia had was a right hand stump and her lucky left—which didn’t seem so lucky when she needed both hands to get the job done.

The doctor had set to work by the flicker of the single vegetable oil lamp and the burn of candles, and Mahlia had been forced to lean close, using
her eyes to tell the older man where to set the scalpel. With her guiding voice, she helped him make the bikini cuts low across Tani’s belly. The cuts that he’d taught her in his medical books, because he couldn’t see so well, with Mahlia handing him the implements as quick as she could with her one good hand until they were in Tani’s belly and found where the blood was coming from.

By then Tani’s struggles had stilled. And after that, she was gone, with her belly cut open like a pig's, and old Salvatore holding his daughter’s limp shoulders, and blood all over the squat.

“That’s enough, Mahlia,” the doctor said, and Mahlia straightened from trying to rescue breathe for the poor dead girl.

Salvatore was looking at them, accusation in his eyes. “You killed her.”

“No one killed her,” Doctor Mahfouz said. “Birth is always uncertain.”

“That one. That one killed her.” Salvatore pointed at Mahlia. “You should never have let her anywhere near my girl.”

At the man’s accusation, Mahlia palmed a bloody scalpel into her good hand, but didn’t show anything on her face as she turned to face him. If Salvatore made a move, she’d be ready.

“Mahlia…” The doctor’s voice held warning. He always knew what she was thinking. But Mahlia didn’t put down the scalpel. Better safe than sorry.

“Castoffs like her are bad luck. Got the Fate’s Eye on them,” Salvatore ranted. “We should have run her off when we had the chance.”

“Mr. Salvatore, please.” Doctor Mahfouz was trying to get the man to calm down. Mahlia didn’t think it would to work. The man’s daughter was dead on
the table with her belly cut wide and there Mahlia was, standing right in front of him, the perfect target for blame.

"Bad luck and death," he said. "You were a fool to take that one in, Doctor."

"Please, Salvatore. Even Saint Olmos calls for charity."


"You're exaggerating."

"She put the Fate's Eye on Alejandro's goats," Salvatore pointed out.

"I didn't touch them," Mahlia retorted. "Coywolv got them, and everyone knows it. I didn't touch them."

"Alejandro saw you looking at them."

"I'm looking at you," Mahlia said. "That mean you're dead, too?"

"Mahlia!"

She flinched at the doctor's shocked remonstration. "I didn't do nothing to your girl," Mahlia said. "Or any goats." She looked at the grieving father. "I'm sorry about your girl. Wouldn't wish that on anyone."

She began picking up the stained medical implements while the doctor kept trying to soothe Salvatore. Mahfouz was good at that. He knew how to talk people down. In all her life, Mahlia had never seen someone who was so good at making people stop bickering, sit down, talk, and listen.

Doctor Mahfouz was gentle and calm in an argument, where most people went off and started shouting. He brought out the good. If it hadn't been
for him, Banyan Town would have run her off long ago. They might have let
Mouse stay, even though he was a war maggot, too. But a castoff like her? No
way. Not without the doctor talking words like “charity” and “kindness” and
“compassion.”

Doctor Mahfouz liked to say that everyone wanted to be good. They
just sometimes needed help finding their way to it. That was when he’d first taken
her and Mouse in. He’d said it even as he was sprinkling sulfa powder over
Mahlia’s bloody stump of a hand, like he couldn’t see what was happening right
in front of him. The Drowned Cities were busy tearing themselves apart once
again, but here the Doctor was, still talking about how people wanted to be kind
and good.

Mahlia and Mouse had just looked at each other, and didn’t say
anything. If the doctor was fool enough to let them stay, he could babble
whatever crazy talk he wanted.

Doctor Mahfouz gathered up Tani’s baby, and poured it into the
grieving grandfather’s arms.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” Salvatore demanded. “I’m no
woman. How will I feed it?”

“‘It’ is a ‘him’,” the doctor said. “Name him. Give your grandson a
name. We’ll help you with the rest. You are not alone. None of us are alone.”

“Easy for you to say.” Salvatore’s gaze went to Mahlia again. “If she
had two hands, you could have saved her.”

“Nothing could have saved Tani. We might wish otherwise, but the
truth is that sometimes we are powerless.”

“I thought you knew all the peacekeeper medicine.”

“Knowing all, and having the necessary tools are two different things. This is hardly a hospital. We make do with what we have, and none of that is Mahlia’s fault. Tani is the victim of many evils, but Mahlia is not the beginning of that chain, nor the end. I am responsible, if anyone is.”

“If your nurse had two hands, it would’ve helped,” Salvatore insisted.

Mahlia could feel the man’s gaze on her back as she dropped the last of the clamps and scalpels into Mahfouz’s bag. She’d have to boil everything when she got back to Mahfouz’s squat, but at least she could get out of here.

She snapped the bag closed, using the stump of her right hand to stabilize, while she worked the clasps with the fingers of her lucky left.

The bag’s leather was stamped with the Chinese characters of the peacekeeper hospital where Doctor Mahfouz had trained before the war started up again. She could make out the characters for “capital” and “friendship” and “surgery,” along with the character for “courtyard.”

Roughly translated, it meant friendship hospital. One of those places that the Chinese peacekeepers had created when they’d first showed up to try and stop the war. A place with sterile boiled sheets and good lighting and blood packs and saline for transfusions, and the thousand other things that a real doctor was supposed to have.

These days, their hospital was wherever Doctor Mahfouz set his medical bag, all that was left of the wonderful hospital that the Chinese had
donated, except for a few rehydration packets still stamped with the words “With wishes for peace and well-being from the people of Beijing.”

Mahlia could imagine all those Chinese people in their far off country donating to the war victims of the Drowned Cities. All of them rich enough to send things like rice and clothes and rehydration packets all the way over the pole on fast-sailing clipper ships. All of them rich enough to meddle where they didn’t belong.

Mahlia avoided looking at Tani as she got the medical bag closed. Sometimes, if there was a blanket, you could pull it over the body to make a shroud, but they’d used all the bedding for the new baby.

Mahlia wondered if she was supposed to feel something at seeing Tani’s corpse. She’d seen plenty of dead, but Tani was different. Her death was just bad luck. Not like most of the deaths she’d seen, where someone died because a soldier boy didn’t like the way you talked, or wanted something you had, or didn’t like the shape of your eyes.

The doctor interrupted her thoughts. “Mahlia, why don’t you take the baby over to Amaya’s house while I speak with Mr. Salvatore. She’ll be able to nurse the child.”

Mahlia eyed Salvatore uncertainly. The man looked like he wasn’t going to give the baby over. “I don’t think he wants me near.”

Doctor Mahfouz counseled Salvatore. “You’re distraught. Let Mahlia take the infant. At least for a little while. We still must arrange for your daughter. She’ll need your rites to send her on. I don’t know the Deepwater prayers.”
The man continued glaring at Mahlia, but some of the rage was draining away. Maybe later, he’d have some fight, but now, he was just sad.

“Here.” Mahlia inched forward and eased the baby from his hands, not looking him in the eye, not challenging him. When the baby was in her arms, she bundled it up. With a last glance back at the dead girl, Mahlia hustled the baby down through the trapdoor in the floor.

There was a whole crowd waiting below.

People backed away as Mahlia came down the bamboo ladder using her left hand to catch the rungs, while she cradled the baby in her right arm. Minsok and Auntie Selima, and Reg and Tua and Betty Fan, Delilah and Bobby Cross, and a bunch more, all of them caught in the act of lingering, heads cocked up and listening to the tragedy taking place above.

“Tani’s dead,” Mahlia said as she reached the bottom of the ladder. “If that’s what you’re wondering.”

Everyone except Auntie Selima looked at her as if it were her fault. A ripple of warding motions went through the crowd, people touching blue glass Fates Eyes, or kissing green prayer beads, lots of motions to push off bad luck. Mahlia pretended she didn’t see. She folded a triangle of blanket over the infant’s face to shade it, and pushed through the crowd.

Out from under the squat, the sun glared down on her. Mahlia made her way down a weedy trail, heading for Amaya’s place. Crumbled buildings loomed on either side of her, cracked sentries robed in jungle growth. Trees sprouted from their crowns and kudzu draped over their slumped shoulders.
Birds nested in the heights, making mud nests, flying out of empty window eyes, chattering and fluttering, sending down droppings on the unwary.

From amongst the green and leafy faces, more people peered out, watching Mahlia pass, families who lived on the old buildings’ upper floors while they kept the ground for chickens and ducks and goats that ran wild during the day, and were penned at night, keeping coywolv and panthers from getting at them.

All along the lower walls of the buildings, the tags and colors of various warlord factions were splashed, painted scrawls competing with one another—Army of God, Tulane Company, Freedom Militia—evidence of the armies who had controlled and taxed and recruited in Banyan Town over the years.

Mahlia didn’t like any of them, but then, since most soldier boys would kill her on sight, the feeling was mutual. But the villagers held onto the illusion that they could assuage the soldiers who warred around them, so they still hung the patriotic flags of whatever faction was currently in power, and hoped that it would be enough.

This year, rags of blue dangled in upper windows signaling support for the Colonel Glenn Stern’s United Patriot Front, but Mahlia knew the townspeople also kept red stars close, in case the Army of God regained the upper hand and took back this territory. A few buildings still showed the stars and bars of Tulane, all chipped and peeled and defaced and mostly covered over, but not many, any more. No one had seen Tulane soldiers for years. Rumor had it that they’d been pushed into the swamps, and had turned to fishing and crawdad hunting and
eels, because they didn’t have enough bullets to keep fighting. Either that, or else they’d made a desperate run north and their bones were now being picked clean by the army of corporate half-men who patrolled the northern borders and let no one pass.

Mahlia’s father had used to spit whenever he said any of the warlords’ army names. It didn’t matter if it was Army of God or Freedom Militia or the United Patriot Front. There wasn’t a single one of them that was worth anything. A bunch of *xiao zhihu*, little paper tigers. They liked to roar, but they blew away like paper in the face of the slightest breath of real combat. Whenever her father’s troops showed up, they ran like rats or died like flies.

Mahlia’s father always talked about the ancient Chinese general called Sun Tzu and his strategies, and how all the paper tiger warlords had no strategy at all—he used to joke about what garbage they were as soldiers.

*Laji,* he’d said. Garbage. Every one of them.

But in the end, the warlords had won, and her father had left with the rest of China’s peacekeeper army while the paper tigers roared their victories from the rooftops of the Drowned Cities.

Sweat dripped down Mahlia’s back, soaking her tank as she walked. Being out in the middle of the day was crazy. The humidity and heat made doing everything more miserable. She should have been hunkered down in the shade, instead of sweating her way across town with blood all over her and a baby in her arms.

Mahlia passed the shop where Auntie Selima sold black market soap
and cigarettes hauled from Moss Landing, along with whatever junk she could
scavenge from the suburban ruins that surrounded them. Old cups made of glass
that hadn’t shattered in the fighting. Rubber tubing for moving irrigation water.
Rusty wire for binding together bamboo into fence. All kinds of things.

A couple of Chinese-made sheet-metal stoves were stacked in a
corner, from when the peacekeepers had been around, trying to make friends.
For all Mahlia knew, her own father’s battalion might have been the ones who
delivered the stoves out here, showing people how they burned better and hotter
than an open campfire. Trying to do all that peacekeeper outreach that was
supposed to make Drowned Cities people who fought each other all the time
focus instead on taking care of themselves. Soft power, her father had called it.
The winning of hearts and minds that was just as important as the peacekeeper
ability to smash the local militias’ combat units.

Ahead, Amaya’s squat waited. It was small, scabbed into the second
story of an old brick building that had tumbled in on itself. On the ground floor,
Amaya and her husband had restacked the crumbled bricks to form a strong pen
for their goats.

Mahlia ducked into the shade of the open ground floor. Amaya’s ladder
was painted blue, and little ragged UPF talismans hung like prayer flags to Kali-
Mary Mercy, thin offerings meant to keep Glenn Stern’s soldier boys at bay.

When Mahlia first saw Banyan Town, she hadn’t understood why
everyone lived in the upper stories. Mouse had laughed at that, calling her a
swank city girl for not knowing about the panthers and coywolv that stalked the
night. Mouse’s family had grown soybeans on a farm way out in the suburban collapse of the Drowned Cities, so he knew all about living in the middle of nowhere, but Mahlia had to learn everything from scratch.

“Amaya?” Mahlia called.

The woman appeared from behind her goat pen. One of her licebiters was slung on her back, a tiny snotty-faced creature. Another kid peeked down from the squat above, dark eyes and brown skin almost as dark as Mahlia’s, peering down the ladder, serious.

At the sight of Mahlia covered with blood and carrying the baby, Amaya’s eyes widened. She made a sign of warding, putting the Fates Eye on Mahlia, who pretended not to notice.

Mahlia held up her bundle. “It’s Tani’s.”

“How is she?” Amaya asked.

“She’s dead. The doctor wants you to take care of her baby. For Mr. Salvatore, since you’re nursing anyway. Until he can take care of it on his own.”

Amaya didn’t extend her arms to take the bundle. “I told her those soldier boys weren’t any good for her.”

Mahlia still held out the baby. “The doctor says you’ll nurse it.”

“He does, does he?”

The woman was a brick wall. Mahlia wished the doctor would have come, instead. He could have convinced her, easy. Amaya didn’t want the baby, and if Mahlia was honest, Mahlia didn’t blame her. She didn’t want it either.

“We aren’t doing it any favors,” Amaya said, finally. “No one needs
another mouth.”

Mahlia just waited. She was good at that. As a castoff, it didn’t do any good trying to talk to people, but sometimes, if you just kind of waited them out, people would get uncomfortable and feel like they had to do something.

Amaya wasn’t really complaining about more mouths, exactly. She was talking about orphans. And when she said that, she really meant war maggots. Orphans like Mahlia who showed up in Banyan Town with a chopped off right hand, bleeding, dying for help. No one wanted a war maggot in their midst. It meant they had to decide one way or another about a peacekeeper’s castoff, lying in the dirt in the middle of their town. Most people had decided one way; Doctor Mahfouz decided different.

Mahlia said, “You don’t need to worry about the extra mouth.
Salvatore’s going to take it back as soon as it can eat on its own. And Doctor’s going send you more food for your trouble.”

“What’s that man see in a one-handed nurse?” Amaya asked. “Is that why Tani’s dead? Because you got no hand?”

“Wasn’t my fault she got herself pregnant.”

“No. But she didn’t need a useless crippled China girl for a nurse.”

Mahlia bristled. “I ain’t Chinese.”

Amaya just looked at her.

“I ain’t,” Mahlia repeated.

“You got the blood right there on your face. China castoff, through and through.” She turned away, then stopped. Looked back at Mahlia.
“The thing I keep wondering about is what was wrong with you, girl? How come the peacekeepers didn’t want you? If the peacekeepers didn’t care enough to take you when they went back to China, why in the name of the Fates would we want you, either?”

Mahlia fought to keep down the anger that was starting to bubble in her. “Well, this one ain’t Chinese,” she said, “and it ain’t castoff. It’s Banyan Town’s. You want it?” she asked. “Or am I telling the doctor you dumped it?”

Amaya looked at Mahlia like she was a sack of goat guts, but she finally took the infant.

As soon as the baby was in Amaya’s hands, Mahlia pressed close. Right in Amaya’s face, as eye to eye as she could make it with a grown woman. Mahlia was a little surprised to find that she almost had the height. Amaya backed up against the ladder of the squat, clutching the baby as Mahlia pushed closer.

“You call me castoff,” Mahlia said, “Chinese throwaway, whatever.” Amaya was trying to look away, but Mahlia had her pinned, kept her eye-to-eye. “My old man might have been peacekeeper, but my mom was pure Drowned Cities. You want to war like that, I’m all in.” Mahlia lifted the scarred stump of her right hand, shoved it up in Amaya’s face. “Maybe I cut you the way the Army of God cut me. See how you do with just a lucky left. How’d you like that?”

Amaya’s eyes filled with horror. For a second, Mahlia had the satisfaction of at least getting respect. Yeah. You see me now, all right. Before I was just another castoff, but you see me now.
“Mahlia! What are you doing?”

It was Doctor Mahfouz, hurrying toward them. Mahlia backed off. “Nothing,” she said, but Doctor Mahfouz was staring at her with dismay, as if she was some kind of animal gone wild.

“What’s going on here, Mahlia?”

Mahlia scowled. “She called me Chinese.”

Mahfouz threw up his hands. “You are Chinese! There’s no shame in that!”

Amaya broke in. “She threatened me!” she said. “That animal threatened me.” She was furious now that she had backup from Dr. Mahfouz.

Angry that she’d been scared by a castoff war maggot. Mahlia braced for the tongue-lashing, but before Amaya could get going, the doctor took Mahlia’s shoulder.

“Go home, Mahlia,” he said.

To Mahlia’s surprise, he wasn’t mean when he said it, or mad. Just… tired. “Go see if you can find Mouse,” he said. “We’ll need to gather extra food to help Amaya with this new child.”

Mahlia hesitated, but there was no point sticking. “Sorry,” she said, not sure if she was saying it to the doctor, or Amaya, or herself, or who. “Sorry,” she said again, and turned away.

Mahfouz was always telling her to stand down, to let the insults roll off, and here she was, picking fights she didn’t have to. She could practically hear his voice in her head as she plodded back toward the doctor’s squat and her friend
Mouse: “A harmless war orphan is something they may not love, but still, they can empathize. But if you seem violent, they’ll see you the same way they see coywolv.”

Which meant they’d leave her alone as long as she looked soft. But if she stood up, they’d put her down right quick.

Sun Tzu said that you had to pick your battles and only attack when you were sure of your victories. Victory came to people who knew when to fight and when to avoid, and now Mahlia suspected that she’d just done something stupid. She’d let the enemy goad her into exposing herself.

Her father would have laughed at that. A hasty temper was one of the greatest faults a general could have, and people who were provoked by insults were easy to defeat. Mahlia had done what Drowned Cities people always did: she’d fought without thinking.

Her father would have called her an animal, for that.