

The rain turned to steam as soon as it hit the ground, or so it seemed to Cooper as he ran down the street, stopping only long enough to help a woman load a box onto a pickup truck before dashing off again. He heard a girl shout from a doorway, “You going to see Little Sister, American Cooper?” and he turned around to run backward, water splashing at his heels as he spread his hands, silently asking, *What choice do I have?*

The girl flashed her white teeth in a big smile. A second prostitute, the same young age as the first, cried out, “Why you go all that way, American Cooper, when you got a Little Sister right here?”

Their laughter trailed him all the way to The Mining Pan. When he pushed through the saloon doors, everyone in the bar, by a discreet glance or hiccup in their conversation, took note of his entrance. Staying alert is how you survived in Lalanga, but by the time the doors stopped swinging behind him, Cooper’s small ripple effect had already passed through the room, and he made his way to the long bar. The storm had knocked out the power, and water streamed in through the damaged roof where a mortar shell had landed during the last rebel offensive—if one mortar shell and two dead drunks merited being called an offensive—but no one seemed worried about the puddle creeping across the floor, certainly not the men preoccupied with fixing themselves up with a girl. They had more pressing matters than rain puddles and civil wars on their minds.

Cooper brushed water from his buzz cut but didn’t have a sleeve to wipe off his face. He’d torn those off his army-issued shirt as soon as he’d arrived in the godforsaken country and felt its waterlogged air. He slid onto a barstool and ordered. “A G and T, Juma, and this time, try to remember the ice.”

The barman, his eyes bloodshot from the perfumed smoke perpetually hanging around his head, took a hit off a joint before handing it back to a customer. “Americans always want too much ice,” he complained. Juma was tall, with a shaved head and a pirate’s gold-loop earring.

“If you’re worried about running short, I don’t see a lot of my compatriots around.”